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ABSTRACT

The provision of vocational education and training (VET) delivered by Australia's adult and community education (ACE) sector was examined to identify the strengths the ACE sector brings to VET provision and challenges faced by the ACE sector in providing VET programs. Data were collected through the following four activities: (1) a literature review; (2) focus group discussions with 255 learners studying in ACE or technical and further education (TAFE) contexts; (3) questionnaires completed by 656 learners studying in ACE or TAFE contexts and 42 providers; and (4) interviews with ACE sector representatives. The evidence demonstrated that education and training provision within the ACE sector has distinctive qualities that are not commonly found in other VET or TAFE providers. ACE used a holistic approach to help learners link learning, work, and social activity in a way that encourages lifelong learning. VET delivered through ACE proved especially valuable to women and disadvantaged persons. Important bridges between the ACE, VET, and TAFE sectors were identified that must be supported with adequate funding. (The report contains 29 references and 22 figures/tables. Appended are the following: a list of ACE and TAFE providers who assisted with the research; questionnaire to ACE and TAFE learners; and a questionnaire to ACE providers and staff.) (MN)

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THE VOCATIONAL ESSENCE OF ACE

The delivery of VET programs by adult community education providers

VERONICA VOLKOFF
BARRY GOLDING
JULIE JENKIN

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> *When I started, I didn't want to look too far, I wanted to get confidence in myself . . . wanted to see what I could do, and now I know I am capable . . . I want to be qualified and get a job, don't want to just clean toilets all my life . . . There should be these sorts of centres and opportunities in every suburb, because all women want to better themselves, and single dads. And if they knew that here was a place where you could come without pressure and better yourself and learn at your own pace, they would do it!*
>
> Carol, a long-term unemployed, single mother in her thirties,
> studying with an outer urban ACE provider.

Executive summary

Background

This commissioned research project formed part of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) priority on the quality of provision in vocational education and training (VET). In particular it coincided with the recommended major research focus in NCVER (1997) on 'the involvement of the adult and community education (ACE) sector in VET and determining what factors drive this involvement'.

The fact that ACE providers have made a contribution to the vocational education of the community is not in doubt. The challenge for this study has been to examine the nature and extent of this contribution. In particular, it explores the ways in which VET provision complements other provision in the ACE sector and VET provision in TAFE and ultimately, how it enhances opportunities for learners.

ACE policymakers and providers face the challenge of finding a balance in the level of VET provision which complements the more traditional forms of ACE provision and reflects ACE provider philosophies. In doing so, it is important to recognise that there are bodies of students who are not directly seeking vocational outcomes and others who seek more from participation in education than just vocational outcomes. The ACE sector has sought to address the vocational education and training needs of people unable to access these services elsewhere, through, among other factors, their lack of previous education and training, inability to pay or lack of confidence.

Objectives

The research brief for this project was to:

- document and describe the extent and types of VET delivered by the ACE sector nationally
- identify the strengths the ACE sector brings to this provision
- describe the challenges faced by the ACE sector in providing VET programs

Methodology

This report is based on an analysis of material gathered from a range of sources including focus group interviews with learners, survey responses from learners and providers, interviews with ACE sector representatives and reviews of research, policy reports and data collections.

The sample selection recognised that the ACE sector has developed differently across Australia. It also accounted for the fact that notions of community may vary between urban and rural areas. A TAFE sample was included in parallel to the ACE sample to facilitate some sectoral comparisons.

The ACE and TAFE samples included a range of:

- small and large-size providers
- inner urban, outer suburban and rural providers
- providers with a special focus on indigenous and non-English-speaking background learners

Findings

ACE across States

There were observable differences in structure, definitions and community perceptions of ACE provision and ACE learners in the three States which were the focus of this research project. Policy, structure and definitional differences have an impact at the provider level on the extent and nature of vocational education for adult learners. They also impact on the role and capacity of providers to deliver nationally recognised vocational education.

ACE providers were motivated to engage in vocational education delivery by a range of factors including:

- policies of funding body
- community demand
- recognition of the capacity of providers to deliver vocational education programs
- the possibility of accessing new markets through such delivery

Learners in ACE

Learners studying in ACE courses were:

- from a broad cross-section of the community, prior study backgrounds and occupations
- generally older than learners in TAFE
- more likely to be women
- more likely than TAFE learners to be unemployed and looking for work
- more likely than TAFE learners to be on a pension or doing voluntary or unpaid work
- if employed concurrently with their course, more likely to be working part time rather than full time in one of a broad range of occupations and much less likely than TAFE learners to be manual or semi-skilled workers
- if unemployed, likely to have previously been working in a manual or semi-skilled occupation

There is evidence of much movement between ACE and TAFE in both directions. About four out of ten ACE learners had prior experience of TAFE programs. Around one third of ACE learners had prior university study backgrounds. By comparison, around one half of TAFE learners had prior TAFE experience and around one third had prior ACE experience. Nevertheless, around one third of learners in both sectors were undertaking their first post-secondary study.

However, many of the ACE interviewees who cited previous TAFE study experience, had commenced access and other low level courses in TAFE but had not completed them. Many had left school early, dissatisfied with the experience and had later attempted to pick up their study in access and preparatory or literacy and numeracy courses in TAFE, but had experienced similar difficulties. Some had commenced university access courses, with similar lack of success. While clearly motivated to learn, they had been unable to find an appropriate context within which they could be adequately catered for, to achieve success as learners.

Vocational courses in ACE

The course sample surveyed in ACE in the three States included the full range from non-accredited vocational education courses to Certificate IV courses. Almost 60 per cent of survey respondents were studying in accredited courses, a quarter of them at Certificate Level II and above. However, 72 per cent of interviewees (64 individuals) in Victorian ACE were studying at Certificate Level II and above.

Learners studying in ACE vocational education courses were:

- more likely to be studying part time than full time
- more likely than TAFE learners to be in courses of short duration (shorter than six months)

There was minimal variation, within the sample of respondents in this study, in the type of courses that women and men were studying in ACE.

Learners' reasons for study

There was little variation in the reasons why ACE learners and TAFE learners chose to study. ACE learners studying in vocational education, general preparatory, adult literacy and basic education (ALBE) and English as a second language (ESL) courses were motivated to study mainly for the following five reasons:

- because the content interested them (89%)
- mainly for the knowledge or skills (88%)
- because the class time suited them (67%)
- to help them perform a greater range of jobs (66%)
- because the course was at the right level for them (64%)

Learners studying in vocational education courses demonstrated an even stronger learning orientation and an increased emphasis on multiskilling, gaining a qualification and satisfaction from study.

TAFE learners indicated two provider choice factors in proportions noticeably higher than ACE learners. These factors were:

- I don't have enough skills to study elsewhere (ACE 14%; TAFE 24%)
- it is the only study I can do (ACE 17%; TAFE 24%)

The low frequency of agreement with these statements by ACE learners challenges the notion that learners choose ACE providers because they are unable to study elsewhere.

The suitability of class time was an important factor in providing access for ACE learners.

Analysis of the survey data indicated that where there was recognition of, and support for, ACE sector delivery of VET, learners had expectations that their VET study options would be available at convenient times, and at levels appropriate to their educational needs. That is, where there was an established culture of vocational education provision in ACE providers, those communities demanded that relevant and accessible VET provision was offered in a form which was most appropriate to their learning needs.

There were differences, by gender, in the reasons why learners studied in ACE courses. Men were more likely than women to be doing their course because of a job or work orientation or to get a qualification. Women were more likely to be studying because of a desire to learn and were more concerned with access issues: having a course that was at the right level and at a suitable time.

When the responses of ACE learners in vocational education and training courses were separated for analysis, the following trends emerged:

- Being able to perform a greater range of jobs was the most common reason for study in VET programs for both men and women, but reported more commonly by women than men.
- Having a course at the right level was the most common reason reported by people in VET programs who spoke a language other than English at home. It was also an important reason for women, long-term unemployed people and those commencing their first post-secondary course.
- Suitability of class time was far more important for women than for men in vocational education courses. Women who were speakers of a language other than English at home or who were in their first post-secondary course were even more concerned that the class time suited them.

Learners' reasons for choice of provider

Choice of provider, for ACE learners, was primarily linked to the quality of teaching and environmental and social factors. The most important of these factors were feeling positive about:

- the teaching
- the setting
- being treated in a preferred way and
- social contact

Access issues were also important considerations for ACE learners, particularly course availability and affordability.

The overall picture was one of ACE learners making informed and positive choices of the courses, environments and teaching styles which suited them. While these factors were critical, ACE was not seen by learners to be a provider of last resort. ACE learners, particularly those who had been long-term unemployed and were seeking to improve their job prospects, valued practical 'hands on' approaches and supportive environments which assisted them to gain confidence and competence.

There were evident differences between ACE learners in Victoria and those in Queensland and Western Australia. Participants in Victorian ACE providers were more likely than those in Queensland or Western Australian ACE providers to:

- be well informed about study options and availability of courses in other providers
- have had prior study experience in ACE
- be intending to pursue further courses with the same provider
- anticipate work in a course-related area following completion of their course

Women were more likely than men to be concerned with access issues in their choice of ACE provider. In particular, women in ACE indicated their concerns about:

- affordability
- proximity of the course to their home
- the course being of short duration

Women also valued environmental and social factors more highly than men in their choice of provider. However, these factors were also very important to men studying in ACE.

Many participants in vocational education programs from different study backgrounds made a conscious decision to study at an ACE provider, specifically because of the environment and capacity of those providers to fit in with personal circumstances of the learners. It was not only learners with poor schooling experiences, or those who were socially and economically disadvantaged, who sought out the particular learning environments that ACE offered. It also included a range of learners for whom the values and philosophies of ACE providers complemented their learning experience.

These findings suggest that the holistic approaches which underpinned the delivery of vocational programs by ACE providers were valued by all learners. They were even more highly valued by women and learners who were disadvantaged by language difficulties or social and economic factors.

Learners' projected outcomes

The majority of learners in the ACE courses surveyed (and a considerably higher proportion than the TAFE learners surveyed) projected that they were likely to work in a field related to their course upon completion. Women were much more likely than men to anticipate this outcome.

Notably, women studying in vocational education programs in Victorian ACE providers were much more likely than men (and more likely than women in vocational education courses in ACE providers in other States) to predict that they would work in a course-related area or that they would proceed to a TAFE or other accredited work-related course.

Learners studying in ACE in Victoria, across all the courses surveyed, were more likely to predict work in a course-related area as an outcome than learners in ACE in other States if they were:

- women
- long-term unemployed

- speakers of a language other than English at home
- enrolled in their first post-secondary course

Conclusions

- Education and training provision within the ACE sector has distinctive qualities which are not commonly found in other VET or TAFE providers.
- This report provides evidence of the capacity of the ACE sector to:
  - address learning environment and access issues while effectively delivering vocational outcomes
  - offer initial and lifelong learning opportunities which provide bridges to further study for learners, both within ACE and to other providers
  - foster diversity and responsiveness to local demand in communities through community ownership and management
  - respond flexibly to the learning needs of specific groups of learners
  - attract and cater for a diverse range of learners seeking quality VET outcomes.
- This report provides evidence from a learner perspective that the ACE sector offers particularly user-friendly, flexible and vocationally oriented initial and recurrent learning opportunities. These characteristics influence learner choice of provider.
- Apart from these factors, learners surveyed and interviewed in accredited programs in this study in ACE and TAFE providers had somewhat similar requirements and vocational expectations. However learner expectations of vocational outcomes were not restricted to specifically VET programs. Learners actively chose ACE in order to achieve a set of personal, social and vocational goals rather than just one goal.
- There is evidence that the capacity of ACE providers to respond flexibly to community demand broadens the opportunities for communities and individuals to achieve vocational outcomes through participation in VET or in other vocational education options.
- The commitment to addressing the learning needs of local communities strengthens access for learners who may not consider study in more formal settings or initially have the capacity to study at higher levels. ACE providers tend to focus on the needs of the learner or learning communities first, then plan to deliver a range of programs to address these needs. When new learning needs or groups of learners emerge, ACE providers can be well positioned to respond and deliver appropriate programs.
- There is evidence that ACE providers have both the willingness and capacity to engage in a range of adult education provision, including the delivery of accredited and non-accredited vocational education courses.
- Community provision, as a source of vocational learning, is actively sought out by adults from a wide variety of backgrounds. While ACE provides considerable benefits to disadvantaged groups, many people with a substantial prior educational background also choose to make use of ACE.
- While many unemployed people find ACE to be a useful and satisfying first step back to employment, many ACE users have considerable experience in the workforce. In many cases, learners use ACE as part of a wider strategy to achieve vocational change: to change vocational direction, to perform a current job better or undertake a greater range of jobs.

- This report provides evidence of clear differences between the perceptions of ACE learners in Victoria, where a coherent community-owned and managed ACE sector was publicly supported and ACE learners in Queensland and Western Australia where this support was less apparent. There was evidence that policy and funding coherence in Victorian ACE flowed through to learner experience. In particular, it was more likely to provide an affordable, accredited course at the right level, at the right time, and in a manner particularly attractive to women, long-term unemployed and people from a non-English-speaking background seeking a vocational outcome.
- This report demonstrates the importance of pathways into and within ACE as well as pathways from ACE. Important bridges between courses exist within sectors as well as between sectors. Further, ACE learners move to and from university as well as TAFE.
- For people to embrace lifelong learning, it is critical that the experience of study be personally rewarding, positive, social and affirming, as well as being vocationally useful. It is also important that further opportunities for study are available to support learners who gain a subsequent job or to provide personal and social affirmation for those who are unable to find employment.
- Levels of funding and the policies that underpin guidelines for State and national funding opportunities, implicitly shape the proportion, and sometimes the availability, of VET provision in ACE settings. These factors also shape, indirectly, community perceptions of ACE provision.
- This report raises a number of challenges for TAFE institutes and community education providers in relation to the planning and delivery of vocational education.
- Industry-recognised skills and program accreditation (as well as associated employability and competitive advantage) are important and positive outcomes for some learners in VET programs. For others, what learners need most in order to gain, regain or keep a job is the feeling of inclusion and self-worth, as well as the confidence and flexibility to learn to keep learning. These vocational attributes, associated with and acquired through learning, are often socially, culturally and community mediated processes. In this sense, a feeling of 'belonging' in ACE has vocational benefits.
- This report provides evidence, from a learner perspective, that ACE has the capacity to:
  - implement lifelong learning principles in their broadest sense
  - play an important part in vocational orientation and preparation
  - address multiple needs of diverse learners
  - anticipate and value diverse outcomes
  - motivate and empower adult learners
  - broaden choices available to adult learners.

Introduction

Rationale and background

This commissioned research project formed part of the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) priority on the quality of provision in VET. In particular, it coincided with the recommended major research focus in NCVER (1997) on 'the involvement of the adult and community education (ACE) sector in vocational education and training (VET) and determining what factors drive this involvement'.

Since 1992, there has been a gradual but significant increase in the delivery of vocational education in community-based settings (SEETRC 1997, p.23). The level of increase and rate of change across Australia have been uneven and influenced by the quite different funding and structural arrangements for the ACE sector in each State and Territory. Changes in State and national policies, the commitment of adult community education providers to respond to local community demand, the development and broadening focus of many of these providers, together with changing demographics in many communities are factors which have contributed to this development.

The fact that ACE providers have made a contribution to the vocational education of the community is not in doubt. The challenge for this study has been to examine the nature and extent of this contribution. In particular it explores the ways in which VET provision complements other provision in the ACE sector and VET provision in TAFE and ultimately, how it enhances opportunities for learners. This study has sought to understand and document the experiences of ACE learners undertaking VET.

It has previously been suggested that the increased range of provision has also offered more diverse entry points and pathways to VET for disadvantaged learners, particularly women, who may not have perceived themselves either as long-term learners or learners with vocational or educational options. For example, McIntyre and Kimberley (undated b) noted that the diversity of pathways for women from ACE to VET was 'testimony to the flexibility of ACE/VET articulation' (Foreword).

The spirit and intent of ACE provision involves an inclusive and holistic concept of education and training. *Beyond Cinderella* (SEETRC 1997, p.14) emphasised that national adult education and training policy 'should affirm the fundamental importance of lifelong learning and of an integrated approach to education and training in which technical skills and general cognitive and social capacities are developed and nurtured together'. Incorporating VET provision in the organisational profile of ACE providers is consistent with a parallel commitment to the concept of lifelong learning. Recent policy development and research has highlighted the ACE–VET debate (SEETRC 1997; ACFE 1997; BACE 1996; McIntyre et al. 1995).

ACE policymakers and providers face the challenge of finding a balance in the level of VET provision which complements the more traditional forms of ACE provision and reflects ACE provider philosophies. However, it is important to recognise that there are bodies of students who are not directly seeking vocational outcomes as traditionally conceptualised and others who seek more from participation in education than just vocational outcomes. The extent to which VET learners generally perceive their study to be about vocations, is far from clear. For example, the Graduate outcomes of technical and further education Australia 1995 survey found that only one third of all TAFE graduates undertook their study primarily to gain a job or for self-employment (ABS 1995, table 2).

The capacity of the ACE sector to respond with sensitivity to local community education needs has been regarded as one of its important strengths (McIntyre et al. 1995). This same responsiveness to community needs, among other factors, has contributed to an increase in vocational education and training provision by the ACE sector. Many ACE providers have embraced VET delivery, by choice, in response to community demand (Schofield in SEETRC 1997, p.24), confident that their understanding and application of adult learning principles would ensure higher levels of student success. McIntyre et al. (1995, p.16) noted that ACE in New South Wales was responding to 'a number of challenges on the basis of its traditional strengths—the qualities of being client focussed, flexible, able to respond to local demand, accessible, and of providing an initial platform for further education and training'. In particular, the ACE sector has sought to address the vocational education and training needs of people unable to access these services elsewhere, through, among other factors, their lack of previous education and training, childcare commitments, inability to pay or lack of confidence.

This research is consistent with, but builds on, earlier work by Schofield et al. (1996), McIntyre et al. (1995), BACE (1996) and Kimberley (1986). The shift in emphasis and methodology in this research derives from its national scope, its focus on participants' perceptions and experiences and on its sampling of forms of VET in both ACE and TAFE.

While ACE has been interpreted and implemented differently in the various States/Territories of Australia (SEETRC 1997, pp.88–100), the ACE sector has generally been able to provide a non-institutional, supportive and co-operative learning environment in familiar community settings. Educational provision in ACE contexts typically recognises learners' life experience, highlights logical connections between their participation in VET programs and other adult learning activities and offers personal support. Initial experiences of VET and non-VET programs in the ACE sector allow participants to gain self-knowledge as learners and then to expand their opportunities for further training through pathways into other VET courses in a range of levels and settings appropriate to their needs. Through its learner centredness, community responsiveness, accountability and focus on local and regional labour markets, ACE is perceived to have made 'a valuable contribution to building the national VET system by diversifying supply, increasing competition in the training market and assisting the unemployed' (MCEETYA 1997, p.8).

Enterprises with employees who are disadvantaged as learners have also recognised the value of the opportunities that the ACE sector provides, and, in many cases, have actively sought the learning environments and methodologies of the ACE sector. As Schofield and Associates (1996, p.9) noted in relation to VET provision in ACE in NSW, '. . . the ACE sector has sought to develop a program which is based on ACE philosophy and practice but which delivers results within the terms and conditions set down by the VET system'.

The term ACE is often used loosely and interchangeably in Australia to describe clusters of students, client groups, a learning philosophy, educational experience, category of providers, educational sectors and types of courses (Schofield et al. 1996; Robinson and Davis 1997; ACFE 1997). It is nevertheless clear that there are parts of ACE provision not generally shared by VET and parts of VET not generally shared by ACE. There are also areas of overlap where provision is shared or contested. The interface and the area of overlap can also be defined in many ways as outlined in Schofield et al. (1996).

The ACE sector can also be viewed in the context of its equity orientation. Golding and Volkoff's (1997) longitudinal study of experiences of VET participants from disadvantaged groups observed that those accessing education and training within the ACE sector demonstrated the greatest overlapping membership of multiple equity target groups. Individuals who are disadvantaged through serious literacy problems, social isolation, lack of confidence, poverty and unemployment often approach ACE providers to enrol in low-level VET programs. This experience of VET in ACE settings often provides a first step to further training in other VET contexts. With the recent demise of many labour market programs, it appears that ACE is one of few remaining options for education and training for many marginalised people (as defined by McClelland, Macdonald and Macdonald 1997). ACE is therefore seen as playing a key role in assisting individuals to overcome their social isolation and reinforcing pathways to further study, particularly for women. In doing so, it arguably contributes not only to the growth of individuals but also to families and communities. Many of these assumptions about what ACE is, and what ACE achieves through the provision of VET programs, form the focus of this study.

Policy context

An initial national policy for ACE was released by the Commonwealth, State and Territory ministers in December 1993. However, in order to accommodate the considerable changes to the education and training environment which occurred from 1993, a revised policy was developed by the MCEETYA Taskforce on ACE and endorsed by MCEETYA in June 1997 (MCEETYA 1997).

The policy nominated some particular strengths of the ACE sector:

- *the diversity of ACE (programs, providers and participants)*
- *the valuable contribution of ACE to the quality of social and economic life of Australians*
- *the capacity of community-based organisations to identify and respond to the needs of individuals and businesses in their local communities*

(MCEETYA 1997, p.3)

The policy endorsed a broad role for ACE, emphasised its traditional practice of involving participants in determining learning needs, program design and content and identified its focus on facilitative methods of teaching. However, it also clearly identified a role for ACE in 'building diverse skills and capacities including enterprise skills and community management skills' (MCEETYA 1997, p.7). More specifically, the policy affirmed the role of ACE in making a 'significant contribution to the development of work skills. Many participants enrol for specifically vocational purposes. Others gain confidence, skills and knowledge which they apply in the workplace or in seeking work' (p.8).

It is important to stress that this national policy is subject to different interpretation in States and Territories across Australia. This study accounts for and explores some of those differences.

Objectives

The research brief for this project was to:

- document and describe the extent and types of VET delivered by the ACE sector nationally
- identify the strengths the ACE sector brings to this provision
- describe the challenges faced by the ACE sector in providing VET programs

Methodology

This report is based on an analysis of material gathered from a range of sources. These sources include the following:

- **Focus group interviews with learners** in 35 providers: 146 participants (57%) studying in community-owned and managed (ACE) contexts; 109 participants (43%) studying in TAFE contexts.
- **Survey responses from learners**: 298 participants (45%) studying in community-owned and managed (ACE) contexts; 358 participants (55%) studying in TAFE contexts. (All focus group interviewees also completed a questionnaire.)
- **Survey responses from providers**: 42 providers.
- **Interviews with ACE sector representatives** at national and State level in Queensland, Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia.
- **Reviews** of research and policy reports and data collections.

This study acknowledged at the outset that what was perceived to be ACE would vary considerably across Australian States and Territories. It accepted that while a fully national survey would be optimal, only some representative States could be included in the sample. Since the conception of ACE varies by State and Territory, so does its perceived intersection with VET in general, and TAFE in particular.

Similarly, what is seen as vocational varies according to individual perceptions. This necessarily limited research focussed on the perceptions of the learners themselves: specifically on the three vocationally related aspects of learner choice, in particular, some factors affecting their:

- decision to study in a particular course
- choice of provider
- projected intentions upon completion of the course

The patterns of ACE provision nationally fall into three broad categories: assured systemic/sectoral approaches (New South Wales and Victoria), community-based provision with minimal government support (Queensland, South Australia and Tasmania) and 'other approaches' (Western Australia and Northern Territory). Metropolitan and rural locations were selected in regions with the three ACE provider contexts in Western Australia, Queensland and Victoria. Victoria was selected in preference to New South Wales for budgetary reasons and because the New South Wales system has been recently and carefully researched (McIntyre et al. 1995; BACE 1996). Two regions, one metropolitan and one rural, were sampled in Victoria while a metropolitan and rural sample were combined in Queensland and Western Australia.

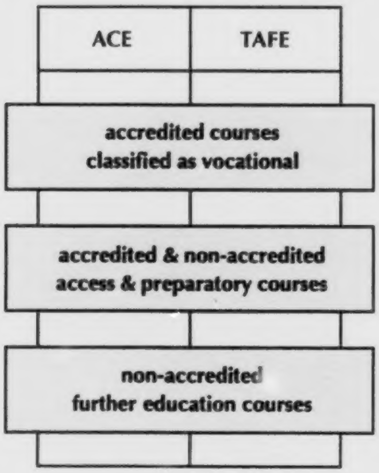
The sample selection therefore recognised that the ACE sector has developed differently across Australia. It also accounted for the fact that notions of community may vary between urban and rural areas. A TAFE sample was included in parallel to the ACE sample to facilitate some sectoral comparisons.

The ACE and TAFE samples included a range of:

- small and large-size providers
- inner urban, outer suburban and rural providers
- providers with a special focus on indigenous and non-English-speaking background learners

TAFE providers were selected in the same general locations as the ACE providers. A list of all ACE and TAFE providers which assisted with the study is provided in appendix 1. As shown in figure 1, learners interviewed in ACE and TAFE providers were enrolled in accredited vocational courses, accredited and non-accredited access and preparatory courses and non-accredited further education courses. The TAFE further education programs selected were those which were also found in ACE settings. TAFE learners in accredited vocational education courses were interviewed to ascertain learner attributes and intentions and rationale underpinning provider choice. This provided some new and important comparisons with VET in ACE learners. TAFE learners in further education courses were interviewed to enable comparisons of the learning needs and profiles of adults in basic education in both ACE and TAFE.

Figure 1: Sample selection of courses by provider type


ACE
TAFE
accredited courses classified as vocational
accredited & non-accredited access & preparatory courses
non-accredited further education courses

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Available data

As described earlier in the methodology, the analysis in this report draws on data derived from questionnaire responses and field interviews conducted during 1998 with groups of learners in ACE and TAFE providers. Table 1 shows the distribution of the 656 study respondents by type of response and State in each provider type.

Table 1: Distribution of study respondents by method of survey, and by State

Sector	All respondents	Interview and questionnaire	Questionnaire only	WA	Qld	Vic.
ACE	45% (298)	57% (146)	38% (152)	51% (79)	41% (73)	45% (146)
TAFE	55% (358)	43% (109)	62% (247)	49% (75)	59% (106)	55% (177)
All respondents	100% (656)	39% (255)	61% (401)	23% (154)	27% (179)	49% (323)

In summary, the available data includes:

- 656 responses to the learner questionnaire (*Survey of experience of courses in adult community education centres and TAFE colleges, 1998*; appendix 2)
- 255 interview transcripts
- 42 responses to the provider questionnaire (*Provider perspectives on the delivery of VET in ACE*; appendix 3)

Limitations of the study

This project and its conclusions are subject to a number of limitations associated particularly with constraints of time, sampling and nationally recognised definitions.

Firstly, the report attempts to give a national perspective of ACE provision using a three-State sample. Because other States and Territories were not included in the survey or interview process, and because of different histories, policies and funding which apply, it is not, for example, possible to extrapolate from Victorian ACE to New South Wales ACE, or from Queensland/Western Australian ACE to ACE in South Australia, Tasmania or the Territories.

Secondly, the study concentrated on vocationally oriented provision. However, the sample was limited by a range of factors including the localities and time frames of delivery of relevant vocational education programs in each State and sector. Further, in Victoria, accurate and detailed information on vocational education programs being delivered in ACE providers was readily available whereas in Queensland and Western Australia it was much more difficult to obtain.

Thirdly, the sampling of providers and courses was purposeful and non-random. While providers were chosen based on agreed sampling criteria, providers were in many cases recommended to the researchers by other parties, and in a number

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of cases were self-selecting. The selection technique aimed to obtain a sample large and diverse enough to allow for viable subgroup comparisons.

It is important to note that all three researchers had a professional connection to either the Victorian ACE or TAFE sector. The researchers worked in pairs and all interviews conducted in providers involved one researcher not connected to the particular sector in that region.

Fourthly, a comparative study of this nature is restricted by definitional problems, particularly in terms of what is ACE, VET, a 'vocational' course or projected outcome. These definitional problems also apply at a national level and within the ACE data and literature in Australia. They also inevitably affect sampling of locations, providers and programs.

The absence of consistent national and State definitions has meant that reliable and comparable quantitative data on ACE participation, and VET participation in ACE in particular, across the three States was not available. The level and accuracy of information available in relation to ACE providers in general, and provision of VET in ACE providers varied considerably. Factors which have impacted on the availability of information were differences in data collection requirements for providers in each of the States, the disparity in definitions and understandings of ACE and differences in provider registration requirements.

Finally, the report is limited in its sampling and analysis by budgetary and therefore time constraints. While the report does not examine indicators of the effectiveness of ACE VET delivery or models of co-operation between ACE and VET sectors, the data collected offers further opportunities for analysis of these and other issues which have emerged. Some were outside the immediate focus of this study and others have not been addressed due to the time constraints of a small study such as this one.

Profile of VET in ACE provision

ACE as understood in a national context

One of the key issues complicating all national research within the ACE sector has been the absence of a widely agreed, national, workable descriptor of ACE. Whether the term ACE refers to a sector, a curriculum area, program classification or types of learners and specific outcomes are questions already addressed comprehensively by Alt and Beatty (1996), Schofield and Dryen (1996) and Gribble (1991).

Alt and Beatty recognised two quite different sets of ACE definitions. One set tends to be defined by peak community bodies, and includes the very broad interests of adult and lifelong learning. The other set tends to be defined by governments and refers to ACE as a subset of all adult and community education providers which are directly supported by government funding.

Alt and Beatty (1996) adopted the latter definitional set in their report. However they also noted (p.5) that:

- there is no agreed definition in Australia
- comparable, reliable data are not available to underpin major quantitative analysis
- the ACE sector can be regarded as a developed sector in only two States

Differences in structure, definitions and community perceptions of ACE provision and ACE learners in the three States which were the focus of this research project, presented the anticipated definitional dilemmas. They led to difficulties of obtaining national comparative data and information, and finding unambiguous common descriptors which have national applicability and acceptance.

Schofield and Dryen (1996, p.10) defined ACE within the context of the national VET system, and proposed three premises:

- ACE is a provider
- ACE providers are community-based providers
- the ACE sector is a network of community-based ACE providers

McIntyre and Kimberley (undated a, p.3) used a similar definition of an ACE provider to refer to 'a community-owned and community-managed organisation delivering educational and other services'. The definition of an ACE provider adopted for the purposes of this research is consistent with that definition. Within the context of this report, the adult community education (ACE) sector is seen to comprise community-owned and managed providers delivering educational and other services. It has not been used to refer to a curriculum, program classification or types of learners.

We have used two key distinguishing and complementary features as the basis for our reference to both ACE providers and ACE provision. These features are the fact that the provider is both community-owned and managed and that it responds to the needs of a community related to its geographic location or to a more wide-ranging community defined through some common characteristic/s. A definition based on geographic location may be challenged in situations such as where TAFE institutes establish small outreach facilities in some rural areas. However, the indicator of community ownership and management is generally peculiar to non-institutionalised, community education organisations.

Where a particular vocational education program is delivered in a community-owned and managed setting, whether that program is taught by TAFE teachers or teachers/tutors employed by the provider, it is considered to be adult community education provision. This assumption is based on the premise that the community-owned and managed provider has elected to include this program as part of its overall provision in response to particular community demand and local issues. This definition makes a clear distinction between the terms 'community-based' and 'community-owned and managed'.

Policy, structure and definitional differences have an impact at the provider level on the extent and nature of vocational education for adult learners and on the provider's perception of their role and capacity to deliver nationally recognised vocational education. However, it is important to note that the learners themselves have a less complex view of their education opportunities and experiences. The learner view is the primary focus of this study.

ANTA tends to adopt the Schofield and Dryen (1996) conceptual view of ACE as partly separate from, but overlapping with, VET. Implicit in the ANTA statements about ACE is agreement that it is a sector rather than a specific program or curriculum area. ANTA has a particular interest in encouraging the area of overlap where ACE providers choose to be involved in VET offerings. The apparent reasons for this support are based on perceptions of:

- there being strong client demand for VET in ACE
- the existence of opportunities to tap into Commonwealth and State funding
- ACE being a 'way to the future', needing to move into both accredited programs, and the making of links with small business through VET-accredited programs
- ACE being more flexible, adaptable and less constrained by the perceived limits of a TAFE institution

McIntyre and Kimberley (undated a, pp.14–17) summarised some advances in knowledge since the *Come in Cinderella* report in 1991 (SSCEET 1991), which identified a lack of evidence beyond the anecdotal, of the role of adult and community education (ACE) in Australian States and Territories. Because only New South Wales and Victoria have State-wide, State-funded ACE systems, previous research has, with a few exceptions, concentrated mostly on ACE in those States. As McIntyre and Kimberley (undated a, p.15) noted, this research '. . . says little about the activity in other States. Truly national research has been lacking'.

Schofield and Associates (1996, pp.26–27) gave an overview of the different structures for the provision of adult education and training across Australia. These structures are summarised below for ACE provision in the three States selected for study. The information was gained, in mid 1998 from learners, providers and policymakers.

What does ACE mean in Western Australia?

In broad terms, the term ACE is used in Western Australia to describe a kind of program or particular style of delivery. ACE is seen to be provision which is characterised by knowledge of local community, focus on abilities and strengths of adult learners, friendly supportive learning environments in local venues, a strong commitment to providing access to disadvantaged people and promotion of community self-help.

According to the Western Australian Department of Education (WADT), it is perceived that:

> *While it is difficult to define the precise boundaries of ACE, from its earliest beginnings adult community education has been characterised by the innovative and resourceful ways it has met the vocational, social, cultural and community needs of adult learners.*
>
> (WADT 1998 leaflet, *An overview of ACE*)

Further, WADT claims that ACE 'happens everywhere' (WADT 1998 leaflet, *ACE settings*). In particular, ACE is seen to be delivered in:

- community neighbourhood houses and learning centres
- TAFE institutes
- senior colleges
- universities (i.e. University of Western Australia Extension)
- University of the Third Age
- in the workplace

Notably, WADT has established an ACE reference group which has as one of its functions, 'advising WADT on ACE issues' (WADT, 1998).

ACE provision in community-owned and managed centres

This form of ACE refers to programs offered by a loose network of community-owned and managed centres, many of which belong to the formal network established by Learning Centre Link (association for community, neighbourhood and learning centres) in Western Australia. These community-owned and managed providers offer a broad range of programs including recreational, basic education, further education and accredited vocational education. Some of these providers have demonstrated their capacity to deliver accredited vocational education programs through their successful tendering in competition with other VET providers. However, the existence of this community-owned and managed provision of accredited VET tends not to be recognised by WADT.

Historically, prior to 1992, the Department of TAFE funded TAFE programs and did not acknowledge the term ACE. Stream 1000 courses were offered but were seen as purely recreational. When WADT was formed in 1993, there was no official perception of ACE provision in WA. Within the competitive training market, there was perceived to be no role for ACE. By 1998, however, there was considered to be a recognised role for TAFE to deliver ACE courses to meet community needs.

Delivery of adult education in informal neighbourhood settings is seen to be:

> *. . . less threatening to people who have had either limited or unfortunate previous experiences of education. ACE encourages hesitant people to*

> *participate and provides them with an alternative point of entry to the more formal systems.* (WADT 1998)

Ducie (1994) showed that participation in ACE in WA led to significant increases in paid employment and self-employment and more than doubled participation in further education and community activities.

ACE delivered in TAFE

The Western Australian Department of Training structure provides 'a wide range of self-funded cultural, recreation and skills development courses and activities through a network of TAFE colleges and centres' (WADT 1997, p.63), which it refers to as one form of ACE program.

These TAFE ACE programs and other forms of education (delivered in senior colleges, university, workplace) considered to be 'ACE' in WA do not fit the criterion of community ownership and management established for this research. Therefore, no research was conducted with learners in these programs.

ACE from a WA State policy perspective

WADT makes no funding allocation to community providers for provision of ACE programs. It defines ACE in relation to how broader community needs are met. The providers which meet such needs are considered to be 'access points', the assumption being that ACE provision covers only the less formal, non-mainstream forms of adult education.

The WADT 1996–97 annual report stated the department aims, in providing ACE programs, were 'to contribute to community development through the provision of a range of cultural and recreational courses that assist people to make constructive use of their leisure time and offer a potential means to re-enter the labour market or mainstream courses' (WADT 1997, p.99).

However, by 1999, these TAFE ACE programs were no longer to be subsidised by WADT and TAFE colleges in WA were to manage their own ACE provision. WADT had determined that it had no role in managing ACE provision, and limited its role to working with providers that did so.

While ACE provision was managed by TAFE providers, it was considered to be quite separate from VET provision. For example, TAFE ACE programs delivered by one metropolitan provider in WA were not offered on the TAFE campuses, but rather at venues such as school sites and community centres. However, the choice of venue appeared not to be related to improving access for ACE learners. The co-ordinator expressed the view that the 'image of, for example, belly dancing was not consistent with the image of a VET provider for industry'.

There were perceived benefits for this TAFE college in offering ACE programs, particularly marketing and articulation benefits, and the potential for revenue generation through fee-for-service courses. However, the move to increase fee-for-service delivery at the expense of concessions-based delivery was seen to conflict with the college's community service obligations of providing ACE for disadvantaged students.

Consequently, two separate streams of courses appear to be emerging in this TAFE-delivered version of ACE provision: those that are more vocational and therefore capable of income generation, offered only without concessions and those which are more recreational, less likely to generate income and therefore available with concession. The potential negative outcome of this streaming is that disadvantaged learners will be denied access to the very courses they need, that is, the vocational ones with greater potential for leading to employment outcomes.

ACE provision in community-owned and managed centres

In 1998, the WADT also provided a small recurrent grant (approximately $80 000) to Learning Centre Link specifically for community sector ACE co-ordination. Learning Centre Link also received some limited funding from WA Government Family and Children's Services which provided two part-time community development staff. Hence the organisation had a dual focus in community development and adult learning.

Learning Centre Link, established since 1982, provides:

- *promotion of the philosophy of community-based learning*
- *networking amongst existing centres and other community organisations*
- *a voice for the interests of member centres*
- *information on sources of funding and educational resources*
- *support and help for the establishment of new centres*

In 1998, the Learning Centre Link network included a total of 80 providers, not only in metropolitan areas but also more than 30 rural and remote providers throughout WA in places as far flung as Wyndham, Kununurra, Broome, Tom Price, Halls Creek and Albany.

This organisation has played a key role in supporting a range of provision in WA, including accredited programs and the establishment of pilot projects designed to meet the needs of particular client groups and exploration of pathways between community-based ACE and TAFE.

Is there a difference between TAFE ACE and ACE in community-owned and managed providers in the Western Australian context?

While TAFE ACE has been offered in 'community' settings, such as Girl Guides halls, tennis and golf clubs, church halls and high schools, these venues have been hired ones, used for the purposes of delivery only, with no additional support and administration elsewhere.

Community-owned and managed providers in WA have generally offered child-care facilities (Learning Centre Link 1995), counselling and family support services, information and referral services in addition to personal development, leisure and vocational and educational courses. Centres operate on underpinning 'principles of self-help and community ownership and are available to all members of the local community' (Learning Centre Link 1995, p.2). They are non-profit organisations which aim to respond to the needs of their local communities. Centres are typically run by 'a volunteer management committee drawn from centre members and other community members' (p.2).

What does ACE mean in Queensland?

The term ACE is ambiguous in Queensland since it is used to refer to program classification as well as to provider types.

Program classification

The term ACE is widely used within the TAFE sector to refer to Stream 1000 programs (recreation, leisure and hobby programs). Within the context of TAFE providers in Queensland, literacy, numeracy, English as a second language, certificates of general education for adults and tertiary access courses are therefore not regarded as ACE.

ACE as a provider type

There is clearly a wide range of community-owned and managed providers of education and training in Queensland. However few of them are registered training organisations and it is these organisations which have the capacity to access government funds for more formalised education and training. Exceptions include the Youth Sector Training Council and Volunteering Queensland, as well as some indigenous providers.

ACE from a State policy perspective

From the perspective of the Department of Training and Industrial Relations (DTIR) in Queensland, ACE curriculum was seen as non-VET: that is, any program which is not accredited or delivered by a recognised (registered) provider. By this definition, TAFE was the largest provider of non-VET in Queensland.

DTIR sought to broaden the Queensland definition of ACE to include other non-VET, non-TAFE provision, including:

- cultural, religious and ethnic providers
- university short course providers
- University of the Third Age
- neighbourhood houses and community centres
- schools which offer community courses through parents and citizens' groups

It is important to stress that many ACE providers already recognised this definition.

Because ACE was seen from the perspective of a program type, policymakers from DTIR did not see ACE as part of their core business but they recognised the potential of ACE programs to provide pathways and promote an interest in ongoing learning. They saw it as:

- a possible additional vehicle to deliver VET
- good for lifelong learning
- a means or mechanism of assisting people to 'go back' to education and training

Given the working definition of ACE which included TAFE, it is not surprising that DTIR admitted it did not have 'a handle' on what community-owned and managed ACE 'was out there'. While DTIR had over 1000 private providers 'on the books', it was unable to distinguish which of them were 'independent, not for profit', community-owned and managed (ACE) providers. This resulted in information about VET provision in ACE being both unreliable and often inaccurate.

In 1997–98 DTIR attempted to direct VET funds to community-owned and managed, not-for-profit, non-TAFE providers in two categories. One was specifically for rural, community-owned and managed provision. The other was for community-owned and managed provision more generally. DTIR aimed to encourage such providers to offer elements of training packages or accredited programs, such as computing, small business, literacy, horticulture, maintenance and welding. Greater networking between community and registered training providers was seen to be a potential benefit.

The proposal was only partly successful, mainly because of the funding criteria. DTIR spokespeople considered that registration requirements to deliver accredited provision (and associated quality assurance mechanisms) prevented many providers from accessing VET funds specifically designed for community-owned and managed providers, during 1997–98.

An example of this is provided in a comment from an ACE provider in Queensland, summing up the opportunities for ACE providers to expand provision.

> *As soon as you get near the (VET) goal posts, there is another big bill. Becoming a registered provider costs around $1000, curriculum costs hundreds, quality assurance obstacles are enormous and there is no alternative but to go down the 'user pays', vocational route. And then they expect you to piggy-back on an existing infrastructure without getting anything for equipment or infrastructure costs.*

DTIR required an organisation to be registered or be in the process of becoming a registered training organisation (RTO) and have a short course they wanted to deliver. In order to avoid the need for providers to be quality assured, the funding available for each program was less than $10 000. The number of not-for-profit community providers with RTO status or with the ability to achieve such status in the short time frame required was very small. The exceptions included larger, established organisations such as the Youth Sector Training Council and Volunteering Queensland.

There were attempts, early in 1998, to establish an ACE council in Queensland which would support the development of community-owned and managed adult education centres as well as ACE provision. However, there were difficulties in determining the directions and terms of reference of this council. One perceived difficulty was getting community-based ACE people to nominate to a council which the community ACE sector did not feel part of from the outset.

What does ACE mean in Victoria?

Victorian ACE is significantly more 'institutionalised' than ACE in the other two States included in this study, in that it is a formally recognised component of the adult education sphere in Victoria. As such, it can be considered to be widely and unambiguously recognised as a 'sector'. The Adult Community and Further

Education Act was passed in 1991, establishing an Adult Community and Further Education (ACFE) Board which has responsibility for planning and development of adult community and further education. Some of this responsibility is held in conjunction with the State Training Board with each board providing advice and being accountable to the Minister for Tertiary Education and Training.

There are nine regional councils of ACFE across the State (four metropolitan and five country regions) which have responsibility for planning, policy development, performance management and resource allocation to ACE providers. Each year, these regional councils determine priorities for development and delivery of adult education in their boundaries, after consultation with communities, and allocate funds to achieve the goals set out in their plans. Providers and regional councils provide advice and feedback to the ACFE Board on plans, priorities and policies to be set in place for the sector.

A distinction is deliberately drawn by policymakers and practitioners in Victoria between adult community and further education (ACFE) as a grouping of courses, and ACE as the community-owned and managed sector of adult education. ACFE programs, which include language and literacy courses, return to work and return to study preparatory programs, adult Year 12 qualifications and hobby and recreational courses, are delivered in ACE providers, TAFE institutes and private providers of the State Training Service.

In 1998 there were nearly 500 ACE providers in Victoria, many of which were also registered with the State Training Board to deliver accredited vocational education courses or modules. These organisations included neighbourhood houses, community learning centres, ethnic organisations, University of the Third Age providers (U3As) and some church and other community organisations. In 1998, annual funding for these organisations ranged from $1000 up to $300 000. While some providers specialised in delivery of one or two program categories, others delivered programs in five or six categories including accredited further education and accredited vocational education programs.

The recognition of community-owned and managed provision as a viable part of adult education in the State increases the range of relevant, responsive and flexible adult learning options available to individuals and communities in Victoria. ACE providers can apply for funding from their regional councils and through the competitive tendering processes of the Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE). About nine per cent of this tendered provision is for further education programs and the remaining five per cent is set aside for VET provision in community providers. In 1998, 17 per cent of OTFE tendered provision in Victoria was allocated to ACE providers.

The ACFE Board has established its own process and requirements for determining whether organisations can be recognised as community-based providers and whether they are eligible to apply for government funds. Community ownership is one of the central values of the Adult Community and Further Education Board. The board considers that:

> *ACE is a democratic sector. To be registered as an ACE provider, organisations must demonstrate (among other things) that they are not for profit and have an elected committee of management drawn from the community. The community in ACE is broadly defined. Most commonly the community in ACE is a geographic neighbourhood but it can also be a group with special interests such as a State-wide ethnic organisation or a local*

> *branch of U3A. Communities of interest can be brought together and sustained by communications technology.*
> *(Adult Community and Further Education Board, annual report* 1997–1998, p.6)

Hobby and recreational courses are an important component of program delivery in established ACE providers in Victoria. As in most other States, TAFE institute provision of this program type is limited and is usually provided on a fee-for-service basis. In Victorian ACE providers, these programs are categorised as General Adult Education courses and although they are not funded, providers may receive some infrastructure funding support for planning and management of these programs. This element of ACE provision is often conducted using volunteer tutors. General Adult Education programs, and return to work or study programs, are seen as important 'stepping stones'. In effect, they are often a first point of entry for adult learners returning to study, encouraging participation and engendering an interest in adult learning through the provision of a non-threatening setting, informal assessment of skills acquisition and exposure to a learning environment which values the life skills and achievements of learners.

As required by the State-wide registration and eligibility policy, organisations seeking ACFE funds in Victoria need to demonstrate that the provision of adult education is one of their primary functions. Many long-established ACE providers also receive funding from the Department of Human Services which enables them to play a community support role and attract into their setting individuals and communities who may then access personal development and additional skills development opportunities through participation in adult education courses.

Often providers with these dual funding sources combine their multiple responsibilities to provide a complementary support and development service for their communities. This capacity is sometimes recognised by local governments which provide additional support in the form of resource allocations or provision of premises or facilities.

In 1992 there was a deliberate strategy (which included a discounted registration fee) to encourage ACE providers in Victoria to become registered to deliver accredited vocational education programs. Initially, although some providers responded to this opportunity with enthusiasm, there were concerns from providers about whether the inclusion of accredited vocational education provision might jeopardise the community focus and the informality of ACE provision. Participation in the delivery of labour market programs between 1994 and 1997 highlighted the capacity of ACE providers to engage in a broader range of provision to address the learning needs of one of their key target groups, the unemployed.

By 1998, 19 per cent of ACE providers in Victoria delivered accredited vocational education programs and were actively involved in tendering for government funds to expand this delivery.

The structures set in place ensure that ACE providers are considered to be a part of the training and further education system in Victoria, alongside TAFE institutes and private providers. In recent years the ACFE Board and its officers have positioned the ACE sector to be recognised, within Victoria, as important providers of adult education. They have also encouraged ACE providers to take advantage of developments such as the implementation of new learning technologies. This has supported further enhancement of the sector's capacity to provide a range of adult education options for communities and individuals.

Overview of VET in ACE provision by State

Data on the level and nature of VET in ACE provision, particularly in relation to the proportion of ACE providers delivering VET programs, were limited. Queensland and Western Australia did not have a process for registration of ACE providers which meant that it was not possible to ascertain the extent of VET in ACE provision in those States. Delivery of VET by non-TAFE organisations in Western Australia was recorded as private provider activity and did not distinguish between commercial, enterprise-based and community provision. Similar difficulties in relation to program and provider classification and statistical information were encountered in Queensland. In Victoria, the data were readily available. There were 486 registered ACE providers and 189 (39%) of them delivered VET programs.

VET within an ACE context

Broadening the focus of adult community education to incorporate provision which has overtly vocational outcomes has, quite perversely, challenged the perception of what is vocational, what leads to vocational outcomes and who are likely participants in vocational education and training programs. However, the Senate Employment, Education and Training References (SEETR) Committee reported that the Australian Association of Adult Community Education (AAACE) argued that:

> *. . . instead of debating the word 'vocational' it is preferable that the ACE sector 'participate forcefully in the on-going efforts to specify clearer and agreed outcomes for the VET system'. The committee is entirely in favour of such improved specification of outcomes . . . Choosing to play the national VET system game—and to play it well—is a perfectly legitimate aspiration of ACE providers and their involvement is obviously in the interests of many of their present and potential students.* (SEETRC 1997, p.7)

Many ACE providers have been willing and active participants in the delivery of VET. However, through their underpinning learner and community-centred philosophies, they have responded to learner perceptions of what is vocationally useful. For some learners, this has meant the skills and competencies in recognised State and national courses or training packages. For others, it has represented specific shorter courses, programs which focus on the development of basic literacy and numeracy skills or programs which would conventionally be classified as hobby or recreational courses.

We have chosen to view the term 'vocational education and training' in the broader sense of provision which has the potential of a vocational outcome as opposed to some of the narrower interpretations of VET as a program entity in itself. This is consistent with the definition adopted by McIntyre et al. (1995, p.35) who argue that the vocational outcome of an ACE course is 'any consequence of participating in a course that promotes the acquisition of competence—in terms of knowledge, skills, understandings, attitudes and values—which contributes to productive work'.

The more comprehensive definition of vocational education outcomes in this study has allowed identification of learners who completed a vocational education course without seeking a vocational outcome or without applying what was learned to the context implied by the content or classification. It also allowed identification of learners who participated in general adult education (Stream 1000) programs anticipating vocational outcomes from this learning.

To evaluate the success of ACE sector delivery of vocational education programs simply by measuring employment outcomes is likely to be problematic. It is clear, however, that vocational outcomes do result not only from VET courses offered by the ACE sector, but also from more general adult education programs. It can be argued that the success of the ACE sector provision of vocational education programs for some groups of learners is partly due to the opportunities offered by the program mix and pathways available in ACE provision.

This study also built on the notion put forward by Kimberley (1986), referred to in McIntyre et al. (1995, p.30) that:

> *. . . community providers took a holistic view of vocational education; they linked vocational preparation with general education and the development of life skills, rather than with a narrow notion of task specific training.*

It can be argued that the success of the ACE sector provision of vocational education programs for some groups of learners is partly due to the opportunities offered by the program mix and pathways available in ACE provision. ACE providers deal with delivery of VET as one aspect of their education 'service'. However, in responding to their communities, ACE providers strive to achieve a balance between VET delivery, provision of vocational education and training opportunities and support for learners seeking vocational outcomes from their participation in ACE, regardless of the program classification.

The insistence in present policy and funding mechanisms (within and beyond ACE) upon differentiating between education programs on the grounds of their perceived or declared vocational orientation is also seen to be problematic.

> *There is a conceptual inadequacy which haunts present policy and funding mechanisms in adult education and training. It is the insistence upon differentiating between educational programs on the basis of their perceived or declared vocational orientation. This vocational/non-vocational divide fails to accommodate the rich harvest of various kinds of educational experiences that make up the learning society. It also muddies thinking, distorts values, and perpetuates a whole lot of unhelpful divisions—between private gain and social benefit; between the market and domestic spheres; between men's work and women's work; between short-term interest and long-term gains.*
>
> (SEETRC 1997, p.3)

Accreditation and ACE

Decisions made by community-owned and managed providers about the uptake of accredited vocational education provision have been influenced by specific philosophical approaches to teaching and learning, State government policies, community perceptions of ACE and levels of resourcing.

Initially, some ACE providers felt that the rigour and formality of accredited provision and the non-threatening, less mainstream approach of community-owned and managed adult education were mutually exclusive. For many smaller providers, the bureaucratic requirements associated with delivery of accredited vocational education were disproportionate to their levels of resourcing and were considered to detract from the holistic nature of services provided for learners.

However, this study identified two main groups of providers who have included accredited vocational education provision as part of their profile. Some remote and rural ACE organisations consider that this category of provision is integral to addressing their mission of providing choice and access for adult learners in their communities. Many of the larger ACE providers have embraced the challenges of accredited vocational education provision. However, the uptake of this category of provision in Victoria could be largely attributed to a range of implementation strategies including cheaper registration fees, accessible professional development, audit and quality management processes and access to alternative funding sources.

It was not possible to fully address all the identified issues within the scope of the given brief for this project. However, they were accommodated through a research methodology which began with client perceptions of vocational orientation rather than one which derived from a policy perspective which remains contested. The findings of Robinson and Davis (1997) have helped to shape the selection of the research methodology. Their contention was that central, policy-driven approaches to VET curriculum would not work and that the clients' expressed needs should remain the central issue in resource allocation.

The providers

Vocational education and training courses are offered by a broad range of community-owned and managed providers. The 'snapshots' of ten ACE providers in figure 2 offer an insight into the range of provider size, location, clientele, type of program and other services which was encountered during the site visits to Western Australia, Victoria and Queensland.

Management perspectives

When tutors and program managers or co-ordinators in ACE settings were asked about their motivation for engaging in delivery of vocational education programs, there were three consistent elements to their responses. These were:

- policies of funding bodies
- demand from current participants or the broader community
- a strong sense of their organisations having the capacity to offer high quality, formalised adult education

Some providers also recognised that the delivery of vocational education courses provided them with the opportunity to enter into new markets.

Figure 2: A snapshot of ACE providers offering vocational education programs

New opportunities in WA

A small neighbourhood centre in an outer urban area of a capital city served a socio-economically disadvantaged community. It offered a New Opportunities for Women (NOW) course for Aboriginal women as well as craft and other courses. It had a kitchen for community teas and lunches, childcare facilities and transport for learners, to and from the centre. Many learners joined classes after using the childcare facility.

Horticulture course in Victoria

A large provider on the rural fringe of a capital city offered an extensive hobby and recreational component as well as modules of two specific accredited vocational education courses. Many learners initially enrolled in accredited VET modules to gain skills to support their semi-rural lifestyles, then completed the qualifications over two or three years. The childcare centre was an essential facility in this small, relatively isolated community.

Applied electronics in WA

A large inner-city community provider linked to a church organisation served the needs of unemployed people throughout the city. Among its range of practical programs it offered a free, intensive, applied electronics certificate course. It also provided occupational health and safety training and assisted participants with résumé writing. Many learners used this intensive but shorter course to complement a longer qualification at TAFE.

Childcare course in Victoria

A large, well-established provider in an inner-city area gradually expanded the focus of its provision beyond language and literacy courses. It retained established ALBE teaching methodologies to ensure that learners were supported in moving through a variety of educational pathways not previously considered to be within their reach. It also delivered programs in outreach centres to offer easier access to women from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

ESL programs in Queensland

A small community house in an outer urban area of a capital city served a severely socio-economically disadvantaged local community and a much more widespread non-English-speaking background community by providing ESL and other literacy programs. Some participants travelled more than two hours to access this program because it suited them and was free.

Facilitation skills in WA

A small community house in an outer urban area offered a range of learning, counselling, support and alternative healing services. These were accessed by both local and more widespread community members. Its six month group facilitation course drew participants with qualifications and teaching experience from a range of education sectors. Some became centre tutors themselves in addition to their regular work.

Specialist welding in WA

A small community centre in a rural town specialised in education and employment services for the local community. Its three month, full-time welding certificate course had a waiting list and drew participants from as far as 50 kilometres away. Participants cited the lecturer's reputation, an intensive delivery mode, specialised content and low fees as key attractions of the course.

Work skills in Queensland

A small community training centre in a rural town with high unemployment levels served a widespread farming community as well as townspeople. It provided a range of programs including short courses in work preparation for long-term unemployed people and offered free bus transport for learners in neighbouring towns. Some learners chose this centre for their work skills training rather than other private providers because of its community ownership and not-for-profit basis.

Basic education in Victoria

This small but thriving rural city community house attracted learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, including people with disabilities. It had a strong language and literacy and basic computer skills focus and well-established links with local schools, churches and community agencies. Many learners were referred to basic education courses by their children's schools and tended to participate over a long period of time.

Intensive VET in Victoria

An entrepreneurial rural city provider offered intensive accredited vocational education courses in the areas of business, information technology and hospitality. It also provided hobby, recreational and personal development programs as well as having DEETYA case-management contracts and offering training for local industries and enterprises. Participants reported being attracted by the intensive nature of the courses, giving them the opportunity to complete a qualification in a short period of time.

ACE providers were unlikely to identify only one or two factors as influencing their programming decisions. This finding supports Kimberley's (1986, cited on p.30 in McIntyre et al. 1995) comment on community providers taking 'a holistic

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view of vocational education', referred to earlier. While many providers acknowledged the influence of funding body policies on their programming decisions, this seemed to be in relation to the opportunities which these policies offered, rather than a perception of the policies driving providers to take new directions.

This interpretation is supported by the finding that providers were unlikely to report that national and State education and training policies were a high priority in terms of the aims of the provider program mix. As one provider manager commented, 'Initially, the centre responded to student demand and funding body initiatives . . . now it (vocational education) is part of our mission.' The same provider commented that 'program balance is a function of funding, content is a function of community demand'.

Contrary to some of the perceptions conveyed by some policymakers, particularly in Queensland and Western Australia, many ACE providers have demonstrated, through their responses in discussion and to the questionnaire, a sophisticated understanding of the complexities of balancing funding requirements and community needs for vocationally oriented programs.

When choosing to deliver vocational education programs, ACE providers reported that they tended to be driven more by community and participant demands than by industry or local enterprises. Exceptions include providers which deliberately undertook vocational education provision as a means of income generation.

Tutor perspectives

Most tutors surveyed suggested that their learners were likely to continue with further study whether in the same organisation, at higher levels or in more intensive or more specific education and training provision. One tutor observed that, 'Some of the students who start learning computers as a hobby move into a Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) (Information Technology) class in the next year.' Another summarised the observations of many tutors by commenting:

> *. . . many of my students value the boost to their self-esteem, confidence and socialisation as much, if not more, than the educational or vocational outcomes. I believe that this is not always taken into account by others, yet . . . it is . . . often a prerequisite to learning and/or moving into work.*

These tutor observations were strongly supported by comments made by learners themselves about their experience of ACE provision and their learning needs. Tutors who participated in the survey invariably reported that learners in their programs achieved personal outcomes which had vocational benefits or that they acquired skills which unintentionally translated into vocational opportunities. These benefits were identified regardless of whether the learners moved into paid work on completion of the course or not.

The views expressed by tutors and program managers in this study supported the findings of Clemans and Rushbrook (1997). That is, that providers sought to offer educational pathways for their learners, often branching into vocational education provision to do so, for the following reasons:

- *to build on collaboration with the local TAFE*
- *to ensure outcomes for students*

- *to address employment and occupational needs*
- *to address community needs*
- *to provide community access to educational opportunities* (p.29)

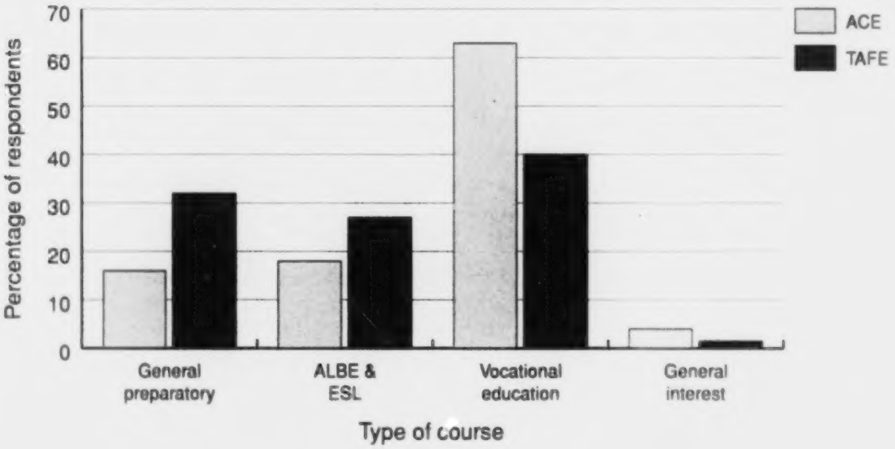
The courses

The courses of study in the sample were not necessarily typical of ACE or TAFE. The mix was a reflection of the sampling strategy used in this research. While focussing primarily on vocational programs, the strategy attempted to achieve some balance, in both sectors, between:

- general preparatory courses
- adult literacy and basic education (ALBE) and English as a second language (ESL) courses
- vocational education courses

The sample achieved that balance overall but with higher proportions of general preparatory, ALBE and ESL in TAFE than in ACE and a higher proportion of vocational education courses in ACE than in TAFE. Figure 3 shows the course type for all respondents by sector.

Figure 3: **Course type of all respondents by sector**



More than 60 per cent of ACE respondents were studying in vocational education courses. By comparison, in Victoria, 37 per cent of ACE sector participants during 1997 were studying in vocational education courses (ACFE 1998a, pp.12–13). This represented 28 per cent of the ACFE-funded student contact hours in ACE providers.

ACE providers were contracted to provide approximately five per cent of the ANTA Victorian (VET) profile, during 1998.

The 146 learners interviewed in ACE providers were studying in a broad range of courses, from short, intensive vocational programs, to Certificate IV level courses taken over a few years. This range of courses included:

- Certificate in Applied Electronics
- Welding Certificate (advanced specialist)

- New Opportunities for Women
- Certificate in Retail
- Certificates III and IV in Youth Work
- Certificate III in Children's Services
- Certificate II in Information Technology
- Certificate III in Occupational Studies (Social and Community Services)
- Advanced Certificate in Horticulture
- Certificate II in Office Administration
- Certificate IV in Workplace Training
- Certificates of General Education for Adults (CGEA, various levels)

Course accreditation status by sector

One quarter of ACE learners were studying in courses at Certificate II level or above, compared with more than half of all TAFE respondents at the same levels. Table 2 summarises course accreditation status for all respondents.

Table 2: Respondents' course accreditation status by sector

Sector	Not accredited or not assessed	Certificate I (or cert. level not stated)	Certificate II and above
ACE	41% (123)	35% (104)	24% (70)
TAFE	14% (49)	36% (127)	51% (181)

At a later point in this report we compare the course accreditation status for interviewees in Victorian ACE sub-sector, and Queensland and Western Australian ACE sub-sector, to analyse the impact of different structures and systems on level of provision.

Forty per cent of all questionnaire respondents who were participating in courses at the time of their response, were studying full time. In ACE providers, the majority (80%) of respondents were studying part time. However, within TAFE, the balance was shifted towards full-time study (54%).

Course duration

Learners were asked to indicate the time within which their course was 'usually completed'. The duration of respondents' courses by sector is shown in figure 4. There is a trend towards longer 'usual completion times' of programs in TAFE. However, analysis of these durations is complicated by the need to recognise that ACE learners were more likely to be taking the course part time, leading to a longer 'usual completion' time.

Almost one third of ACE learners (32%) were studying in courses shorter than three months, and almost half (47%) were in courses shorter than six months. However, a similar proportion of ACE and TAFE respondents (almost 30%) were studying in courses of more than one year's duration.

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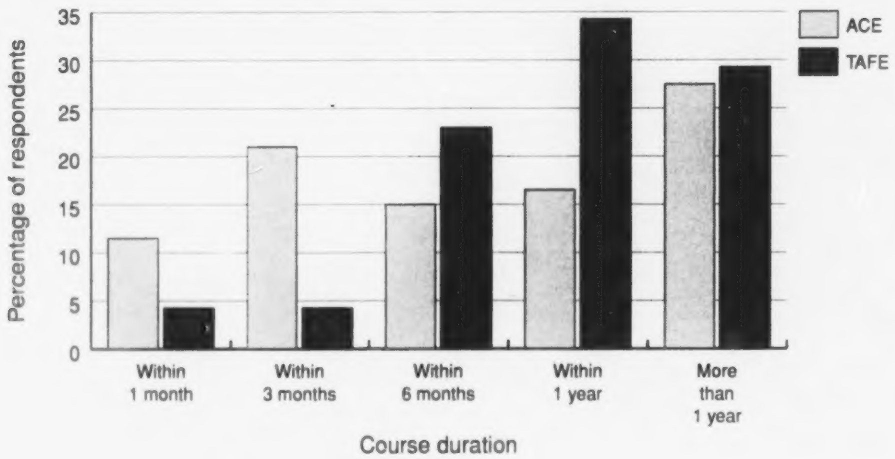
Figure 4: Duration of respondents' courses by sector



There were observable differences in the levels at which ACE learners were studying by State. However, this effect may have been influenced by the sampling strategy. The task of locating providers which offered higher level VET courses was much easier in Victoria than in the other States. Clearly the established ACE sector system and structure has had an impact on the availability of higher level VET programs in ACE providers.

Table 3 shows the course levels of interviewees by ACE sub-sector.

Table 3: Respondents' course level by ACE sub-sector

Sector	Below cert. level or status unknown	Certificate I	Certificate II	Certificate III or above
All ACE providers	27% (39)	25% (37)	21% (30)	2;7% (40)
ACE Vic.	21% (19)	7% (6)	34% (30)	38% (34)
ACE Qld & WA	35% (20)	54% (31)	–	11% (6)

Approximately one quarter of all ACE sector interviewees was found at each of the four levels shown. However, almost three quarters of the interviewees in ACE in Victoria (72%) were studying at Certificate II and above level compared with only 11 per cent of those studying in ACE providers in Queensland and Western Australia.

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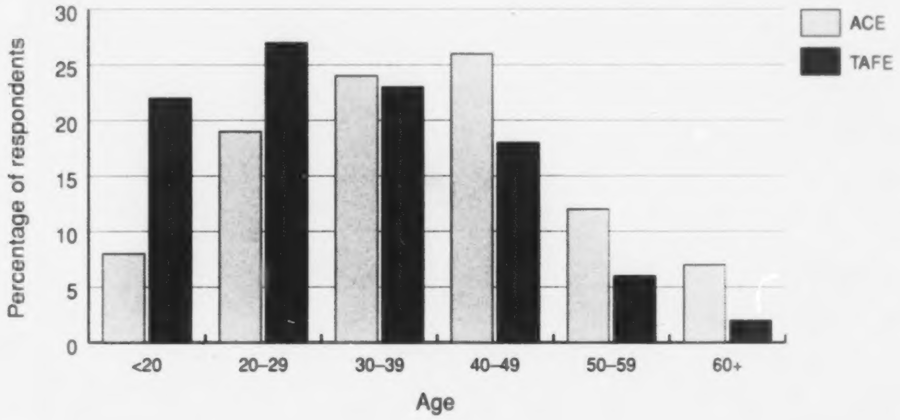
Profile of ACE learners undertaking VET

Who participates in VET in ACE?

The learners surveyed in ACE providers were generally older than those in TAFE providers. Almost half of TAFE learners surveyed (49%) were younger than 30 years of age while only a quarter (27%) of ACE learners surveyed were in this age group. Figure 5 shows the age of respondents by sector.

Figure 5: Age of respondents by sector



Conversely, more than half of ACE respondents were over 40 years of age, compared with only a quarter (26%) of TAFE respondents.

A much greater proportion of ACE respondents were women (72%) compared with TAFE respondents (47%). Non-English-speaking background people and people with a disability were in similar proportions in both the ACE and TAFE samples. However, there was a greater proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the TAFE providers sampled. Table 4 shows a range of respondent attributes (linked to recognised education and training target groups) by sector.

Table 4: Respondents' membership of equity target groups by provider type

Sector	Women	Language other than English at home	Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	With disability	Long-term unemployed	Rural (non-capital city)
ACE	72% (205)	24% (69)	5% (13)	8% (22)	48% (125)	38% (107)
TAFE	47% (182)	22% (75)	12% (43)	7% (25)	35% (117)	51% (189)
All	59% (387)	23% (144)	9% (56)	7% (47)	37% (242)	45% (296)

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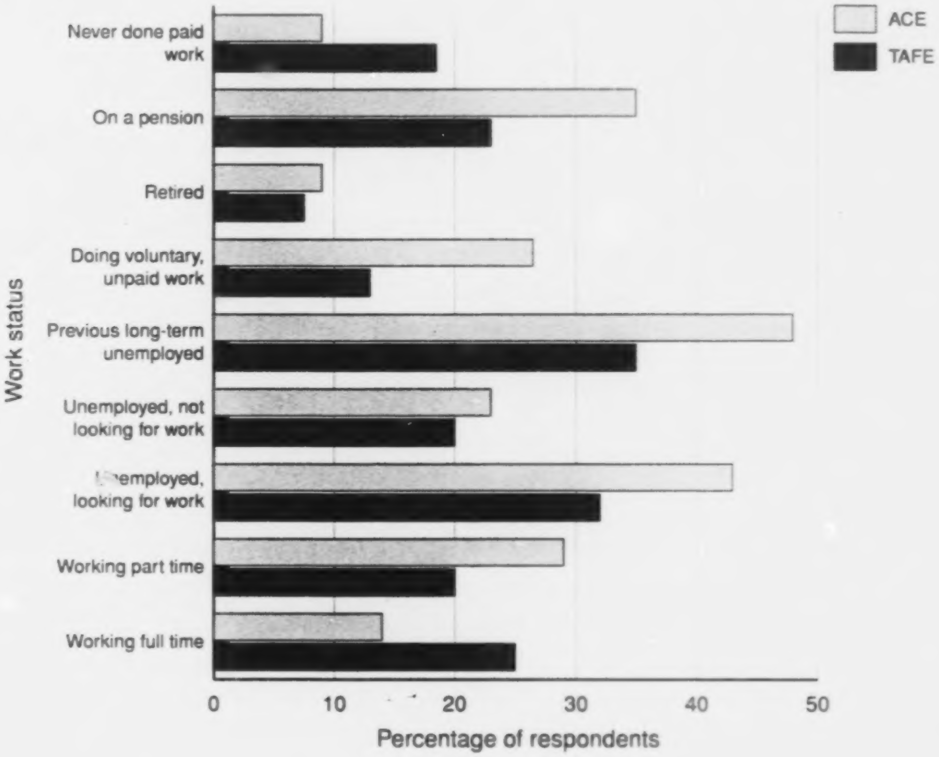
More TAFE respondents resided in rural (non-capital city) locations than ACE respondents. Almost half (48%) of all the ACE respondents had been long-term unemployed (unemployed for more than six months before starting the course). Though a lower proportion of TAFE respondents (35%) reported long-term unemployment, it was still a common experience.

Work status

ACE respondents were much more likely to be unemployed and looking for work during their course (43%) than respondents in TAFE (32%). Figure 6 shows the work status of respondents by sector.

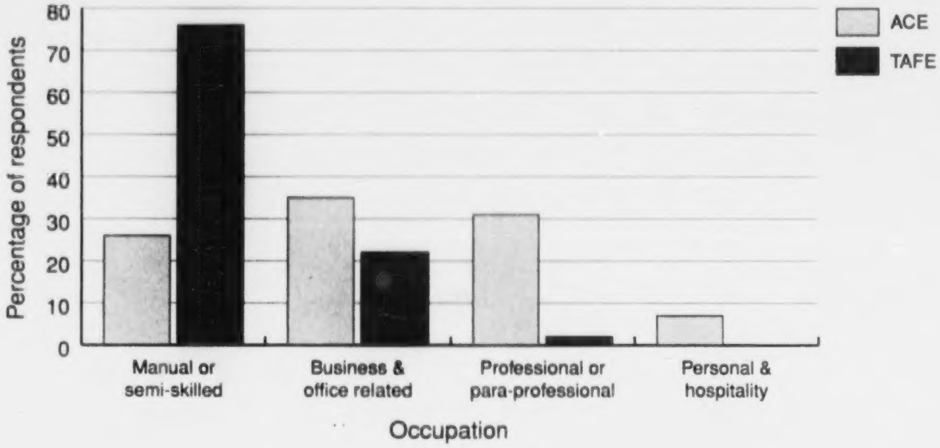
Figure 6: Work status of respondents by sector



Of those respondents who were working during the course, ACE learners were more likely to be working part time (29%), than TAFE learners (20%). TAFE respondents were more likely to be working full time (25%) compared with those in ACE (14%). ACE respondents were more likely to be on a pension and doing voluntary or unpaid work. The proportion of retired people was similar amongst both ACE and TAFE respondents and less than ten per cent in both cases. TAFE respondents were twice as likely as ACE respondents to have never done any paid work before, reflecting the larger proportion of young respondents in the TAFE sector. This was a factor commented upon, particularly by women returning to study in ACE providers, who sometimes reported feeling out of place in TAFE settings.

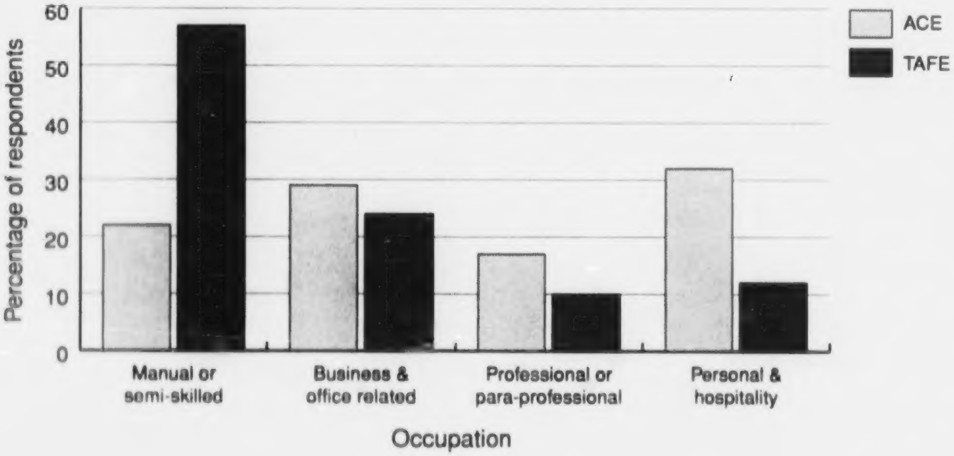
Occupations of learners enrolled in vocational education courses varied by employment status and by sector. As shown in figure 7, three quarters (76%) of respondents who were full-time workers studying in VET at TAFE were employed as manual or semi-skilled workers. The proportion of full-time workers studying in vocational education courses at ACE who were manual or semi-skilled workers was close to a quarter (26%).

Figure 7: Respondents' concurrent full-time occupation by sector



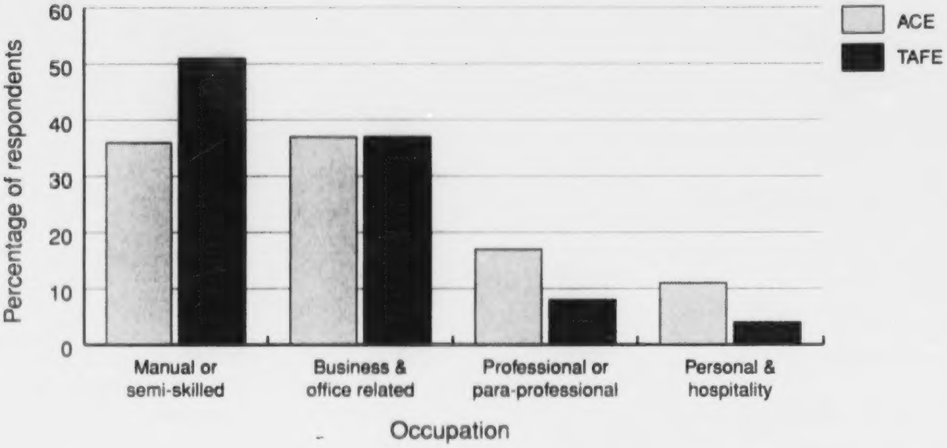
Compared with surveyed students in TAFE, full-time workers surveyed in ACE vocational education courses were working in a broader range of occupations. These occupations included business or office-related occupations (35%) and professional and para-professional occupations (31%). TAFE respondents were much more likely to be working in a manual or semi-skilled occupation, whether full time or part time. Figure 8 shows respondents' concurrent part-time occupation by sector.

Figure 8: Respondents' concurrent part-time occupation by sector



If not working during their study, TAFE respondents were also more likely to have previously been manual or semi-skilled workers. ACE learners reported a wider distribution of concurrent and previous occupations, as shown in figures 7, 8 and 9.

Figure 9: Respondents' previous occupation by sector (if unemployed during the course)



In summary, it is notable that ACE learners who were working concurrently with their study in a vocational education course, represented workers in a wider range of occupations than working TAFE learners studying in similar courses. However, a larger proportion of unemployed learners, in our ACE sample, had manual or semi-skilled occupational backgrounds.

These findings are consistent with the findings of McIntyre et al. (1995) who established that ACE in New South Wales was 'reaching a cross-section of the community and broad range of occupations' (p.11).

Previous study background

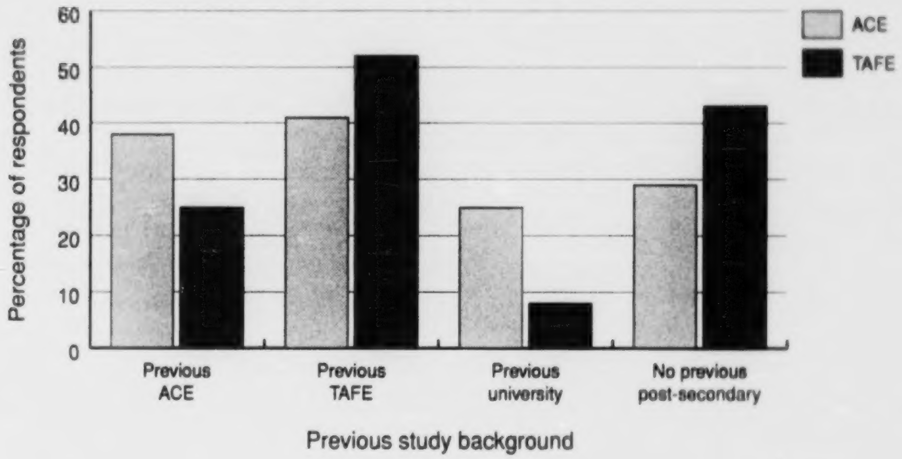
The generally younger TAFE learners also had fewer experiences of prior post-secondary study than ACE respondents. Figure 10 shows the respondents' study backgrounds by sector. ACE learners were more likely to have previous ACE and university study backgrounds than those studying at TAFE. Clearly, some learners in both TAFE and ACE had previous experience of study in more than one sector.

Despite the overall higher level of previous study experience reported by ACE learners in the questionnaires, compared with TAFE learners, many of the ACE respondents reported, during the focus group interviews, that they:

- had unsatisfactory previous experiences of schooling
- had limited literacy and numeracy skills or English language skills
- had incomplete and/or unsatisfactory experiences of previous post-secondary study
- were retraining for new jobs because of dislocation from their primary occupation through incapacity or retrenchment

At first glance, these statements do not accord with the data on previous study experience shown in figure 10. However, many of the ACE interviewees who cited previous TAFE study experience, also reported that they had commenced

Figure 10: Respondents' study backgrounds by sector



access and other low-level courses in TAFE but had not completed them. Some had left school early, dissatisfied with the experience and later, had attempted to pick up their study in access and preparatory or literacy and numeracy courses in TAFE, but had experienced similar difficulties. Some had commenced university access courses, with similar lack of success. While clearly motivated to learn, they had previously been unable to find an appropriate context within which they could be adequately catered for, to achieve success as learners.

Differences by gender

There was minimal variation, within the sample of respondents in this study, in the courses that women and men were studying in ACE. Table 5 shows respondents' course types by gender.

Table 5: Respondents' course type by gender

Gender	General preparatory	ALBE and ESL	Vocational education	General interest
Women	25% (95)	22% (85)	51% (96)	3% (10)
Men	26% (64)	24% (59)	49% (118)	0

What motivated learners to study?

Interviewees and questionnaire respondents were asked to indicate their reasons for studying in the course. A checklist of potential reasons was provided which allowed for agreement (or disagreement) with as many statements as were appropriate for each individual.

Some of the ACE learners in vocational education programs had specific vocational intentions or requirements such as needing to reskill to gain or maintain a job or secure a promotion. For others, the content, learning experience and learning environment were valued as being of equal or higher importance.

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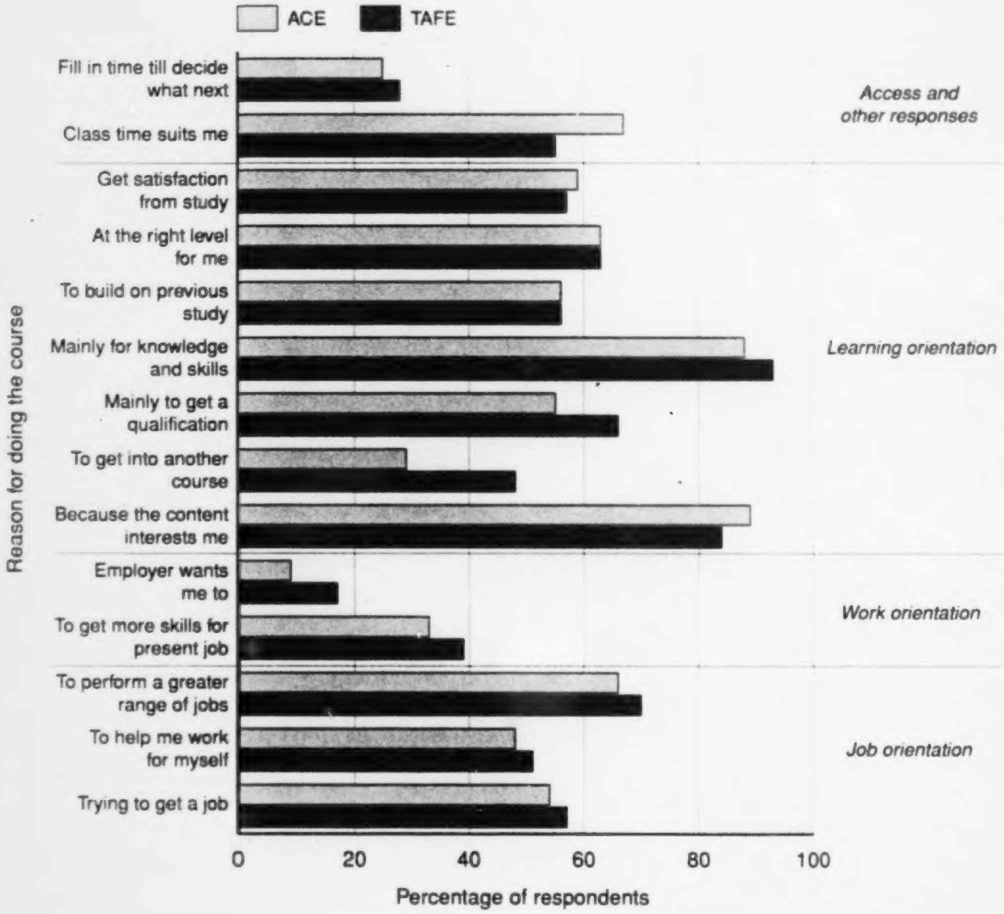
Learner responses to the question 'Why study in this course?', by sector, are shown in figure 11. To facilitate analysis, reasons have been grouped in four categories:

- **Job orientation**: These included responses which indicated participation in the course involved a job (seeking, making or prospect enhancing) orientation, as shown by agreement with statements: *because I am trying to get a job; to help me work for myself; to help me perform a greater range of jobs.*
- **Work orientation**: These included responses which indicated participation in the course involved a (current) work orientation, as shown by agreement with statements: *to get more skills for my present job; because my employer wants me to.*
- **Learning orientation**: These included responses which indicated participation in the course involved a learning orientation, as shown by agreement with statements: *because the content interests me; in order to get into another course; mainly to get a qualification; mainly for the knowledge or skills; because it builds on my previous study; because it is at the right level for me; because I get a lot of satisfaction from study.*
- **Access and other**: These included responses: *because the class time suits me; to fill in time till I decide what to do next.*

Figure 11: Respondents' reasons for study in the course by sector



When all ACE interviewee and questionnaire responses were considered, irrespective of what courses the learners were enrolled in, the following reasons for study were most common among ACE learners:

- because the content interested them (89%)
- mainly for the knowledge or skills (88%)
- because the class time suited them (67%)
- to help them perform a greater range of jobs (66%)
- because the course was at the right level for them (64%)

The three most common reasons for doing the course were not specifically work and job oriented. The fourth most common motivational reason was about broadening vocational options rather than just getting a job (53%). ACE respondents clearly demonstrated that a learning orientation was a common motivating force. The two most common reasons for ACE learners were similar to those most commonly reported by TAFE respondents.

An examination of the reasons for doing the course for both ACE and TAFE learners, without taking account of type of course, revealed that there was less than ten per cent variation for all but three of the 14 statements of motivation.

ACE respondents were less likely to be studying:

- in order to get into another course (ACE 29% agree; TAFE 48% agree)
- mainly to get a qualification (ACE 55% agree; TAFE 66% agree)

ACE respondents were more likely to be studying:

- because the class time suits (ACE 67% agree; TAFE 55% agree)

In summary, though ACE learners clearly had a learning orientation and valued the suitability of class time, each of the three 'job oriented' reasons was nominated by at least half of all ACE learners.

The following brief excerpts from the transcripts of interviews with ACE learners offer an insight into the range of reasons why people engaged in study in ACE. For some interviewees, a return to study was prompted by a desire to broaden the scope of their activities outside the home.

Helen, an Aboriginal woman in her thirties, explained that she commenced a New Opportunities for Women course at her local ACE provider because, 'When you sit at home your brain rusts up and you need to do something.' This desire to keep in touch with the world, to maintain an active mental state was important for many women. Some valued the personal development while others emphasised the importance of this development for their role as parents.

While some interviewees in ACE conveyed their continuing enthusiasm for learning, others were just beginning to explore their abilities as learners for the first time since leaving school. Some reported that it was very difficult for them to enter adult study because of the lack of confidence, low self-esteem and inadequate basic skills which had resulted from their unpleasant and unsuccessful previous experiences of schooling.

Margaret, a rural woman in her thirties who had not undertaken any other post-school study, was close to completing a Certificate III in Children's Services and was working part time in childcare when interviewed. She had undertaken all the study for this qualification at her local, rural ACE provider. Margaret reflected on her entry to the course:

> *At school I always failed and vowed I would never go back to school, but my friend encouraged me to have a go . . . Never did well at school, never had any confidence. Now have much more confidence, I really surprised myself and my family . . . Never even dreamed of going to TAFE because I never thought I could do it and had to take children to school and drop off etc. . .*

While some interviewees were exploring their potential as learners for the first time since leaving school, others were returning to study to rebuild their work prospects.

Sarah, a woman in her forties, started working from her suburban home, using her computer, after a long absence from the workforce. She chose to study at a nearby ACE provider to update her skills because:

> *typing skills didn't mean much if I didn't have computer skills . . . After a 12 year absence during a period of enormous technological change I found my confidence was zero because my knowledge was very limited. There had been huge changes. So much knowledge to gain . . . To be employable and to stay employed you have to be multi-skilled and also the more you learn, the more you want to learn. It doesn't seem as alien now, you want to do more and to move on more and more.*

Non-English-speaking background migrants sought English language and literacy classes to assist them in their immediate job seeking, enrolment in further courses and their formal and social relationships. Often faced with lack of recognition of their overseas acquired qualifications, migrant interviewees were starting the long process of re-generating qualifications in similar or new fields in ACE.

Katerina, a non-English-speaking background woman in her forties, had been a primary school teacher in a South American country prior to migrating to Australia. However, her qualification and experience did not help her work prospects in Australia. She explained that she came to the ACE provider to learn English because:

> *I want to improve my English. I need to speak well because I want to do a course about library, because (I) would like to work as a librarian or as a library assistant . . . Also I need to communicate with my neighbour, to have new friends . . . and I like to read, English books.*

Migrants were not the only learners who sought to re-invent their working lives. This was a task often faced by men, in particular those who had lost their previous, mainly manual or semi-skilled labouring jobs due to injury or retrenchment.

Allan commenced study because he needed to establish new work opportunities for himself following an accident which prevented him from working in his previous job. He travelled 75 kilometres from his rural home to attend a six month, full-time certificate course in applied electronics at an inner city ACE provider. Though Allan was in his forties, this was his first post-secondary study since leaving school at the age of 15 in 1969. He explained that he was:

> *. . . being rehabilitated into a different area of work after an accident . . . I was a furniture removalist before the accident . . . This is the only course that I*

> *was offered by CRS (Commonwealth Rehabilitation Service), therefore no choice . . . (but) just love the place . . . (the staff) work very hard and . . . are well organised.*

While Allan was directed to study at the centre by CRS, for some learners, study at their local ACE centre was a natural, and perhaps even accidental, extension of their other forms of participation at the centre. Some learners used childcare facilities, counselling and support services, attended craft workshops or other activities, or made contributions themselves as volunteers before enrolling in a course.

Sandra, a part-time counsellor in her fifties, had been involved with an outer urban community house as a volunteer and had used other services before she chose to enrol in a group facilitators course:

> *. . . mainly to get a qualification and build on my previous study, to give me further skill . . . satisfaction knowing I'm competent, in knowing how to speak. I saw the notice (about the course) and I thought it was interesting and I applied for it . . . didn't know I wanted it until I saw it. I was only coming here for another reason.*

Differences by State ACE

There was a particular divergence between the reasons for participation identified by learners in Victorian ACE providers compared with those in Western Australian and Queensland community-owned and managed providers in terms of the:

- suitability of class time (Vic. 80%; Qld/WA 55%)
- desire for a qualification (Vic. 65%; Qld/WA 44%)
- satisfaction gained from study (Vic. 70%; Qld/WA 49%)
- perception that the course was at the right level (Vic. 74%; Qld/WA 55%)

While there are likely to be some gender-related effects in the case of class time suitability, Victorian ACE participants were more likely to identify these four criteria than participants in States where the concept of an ACE sector was less formalised. On the basis of this sample, a course at the right level and at the right time, with a qualification, was a characteristic distinguishing provision in an established and supported ACE sector from community-owned and managed provision in a context where VET in ACE opportunities were not supported.

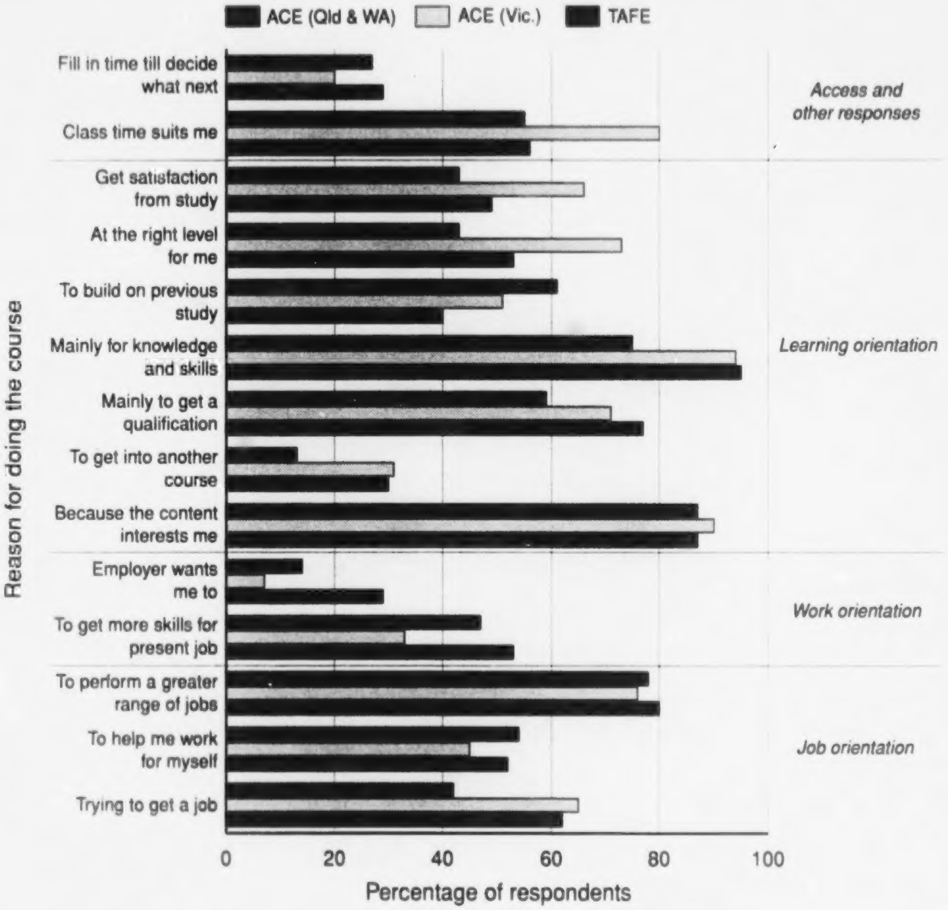
Analysis of responses from questionnaires indicates that where there is recognition of, and support for, ACE sector delivery of VET, learners have expectations that their VET study options will be available at convenient times, and at levels appropriate to their educational needs. That is, where there is an established culture of VET in ACE provision, those communities demand that relevant and accessible VET provision is offered in a form which is most appropriate to their learning needs.

It was notable that while learners in ACE generally were somewhat less likely than those in TAFE to be studying in order to get a job (ACE 53%; TAFE 57%), when considered separately by State ACE sector, it became evident that learners in ACE in Victoria were as likely as all TAFE learners to be studying because they were trying to get a job (ACE Vic. 59%; TAFE 57%).

When respondents' reasons for study, specifically in vocational education programs in ACE in Victoria, Queensland and Western Australia, and TAFE (in all States combined) were analysed, some clear variations became evident.

Figure 12 offers a comparison of reasons for study for respondents enrolled in vocational education courses.

Figure 12: Respondents' reasons for study by sector (learners in vocational courses)



It is notable that, for some reasons for study, participant responses in Queensland and Western Australian community-owned and managed providers were more similar to TAFE responses than to Victorian ACE responses. This was true for reasons such as 'to help me work for myself' and 'employer wants me to' reflecting the lower proportion of Victorian ACE learners who were working. However, as illustrated in figure 12, this similarity between responses of Queensland and Western Australian ACE participants and TAFE participants was not always the case. For some reasons for study, there were greater similarities between Victorian ACE and TAFE responses, for example for reasons such as 'trying to get a job', 'to get a qualification', 'to get into another course' and 'mainly for the knowledge and skills'. These responses reflected a stronger orientation to study for vocational or further education reasons.

Victorian ACE participants cited some access and environmental reasons in far greater proportions than TAFE and Queensland and Western Australian ACE respondents. These reasons were that the class time suited them, that they got satisfaction from their study and that the course was at the right level for them.

While there was strong agreement between all respondent groups in relation to interest in the content and the desire to become more multi-skilled, the variations noted above imply that, within the limitations of this study, Victorian ACE vocational education courses were generally more closely aligned with the needs of Victorian ACE learners than vocational education courses in ACE in Queensland and Western Australia were to their learners and TAFE to its clientele in all three States.

Differences by gender

Men and women who participated in this study were found to have similar participation rates in different courses. However, there were distinct differences in the reasons for participation that they reported. Men were more likely than women to be doing their course because of a job or work orientation as shown by agreement with the statements:

- because I am trying to get a job (men 62%; women 51%)
- to help me work for myself (men 53%; women 48%)
- to get more skills for my present job (men 42%; women 33%)
- because my employer wants me to (men 20%; women 8%)

Men were also more likely to value getting a qualification.

Women were more likely than men to be doing their course because of a learning orientation, as shown by agreement with the statements:

- because I get a lot of satisfaction from studying (women 64%; men 48%)
- for the knowledge and skills (women 93%; men 86%)
- because of interest in the content (women 89%; 82%)
- to build on previous study (women 59%; men 52%)

Women were also much more concerned with access issues, as shown by agreement with the statements:

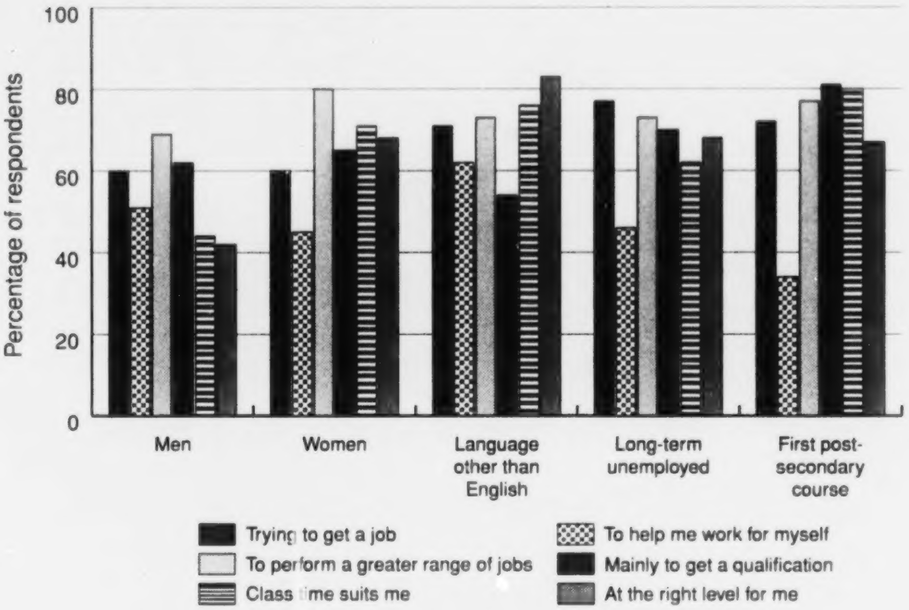
- because it's at the right level for me (women 70%; men 57%)
- because the class time suits (women 70%; men 47%)

Differences by group membership

The data were analysed to explore whether there were differences in the reasons that learners in different groups chose to participate in vocational education courses. Figure 13 shows respondents' reasons for participation in vocational education courses in ACE by group membership.

The most common reason given by both women and men in vocational education courses in ACE was to gain the ability to perform a greater range of jobs. However, a larger proportion of women (80%) cited this reason. Having a course at the right level (83%) was the most common reason reported by people who spoke a language other than English at home. This was also an important reason for women, long-term unemployed people and people commencing their first post-secondary course.

Figure 13: **Respondents' reasons for participation in vocational education courses in ACE by group membership**



As discussed earlier for respondents in all courses surveyed, the suitability of class time was more important for women (71%) than men (43%) in vocational education courses as well. It was even more important for learners in their first post-secondary course (80%), of whom 77 per cent were women and for learners who spoke a language other than English at home (76%), of whom 87 per cent were women.

Learners who spoke a language other than English at home were more likely than other learners to be studying in order to help them work for themselves. Not surprisingly, learners studying in a post-secondary course for the first time (81%) were more likely to report that they were studying mainly to get a qualification. Learners who spoke a language other than English at home (54%) were much less likely than other groups to be studying mainly to get a qualification. This may have been because many already held post-secondary qualifications in their first language which were not recognised in Australia.

Why did learners choose ACE?

Learners were asked to identify the reasons they chose a particular provider. The list of statements allowed for agreement or disagreement with as many items as were appropriate.

Responses to the question asking why learners had chosen a particular provider were grouped for analysis in the following four categories:

- **Access**: These included responses which indicated selection of the provider related to issues of access, as shown by agreement with statements: *I can afford the course here; it is close to where I live; it is the only study I can do; I don't know about the courses offered elsewhere.*
- **Environmental and social**: These included responses which indicated selection of the provider related to environmental and social issues, as shown by agreement with statements: *I feel comfortable here; I like the social contact; I have friends here; I have studied here before; I like the way I'm treated here.*
- **Course appropriateness**: These included responses which indicated selection of the provider related to issues of course appropriateness, as shown by agreement with statements: *the course I want to do is offered here; the course is short; I don't have enough skills to study elsewhere.*
- **Course quality**: These included responses which indicated selection of the provider related to issues of quality, as shown by agreement with statements: *I like the way they teach here; I think the course is taught better here.*

Overall, all learners surveyed identified six common factors influencing their choice of provider:

- the teaching
- the way they were treated
- the availability of the course
- feeling comfortable
- affordability
- social contact

As shown in figure 14, each of these factors was identified by more than 70 per cent of respondents across ACE and TAFE providers in the three States in this study.

Notably, for ACE learners, the choice of provider was primarily linked to the quality of teaching and environmental and social factors. The most important of these factors for ACE respondents related to liking the teaching (84%), feeling comfortable in the setting (93%), being treated in a preferred way (90%) and liking the social contact (82%). Access issues were also important considerations for ACE learners, particularly course availability (89%) and affordability (85%).

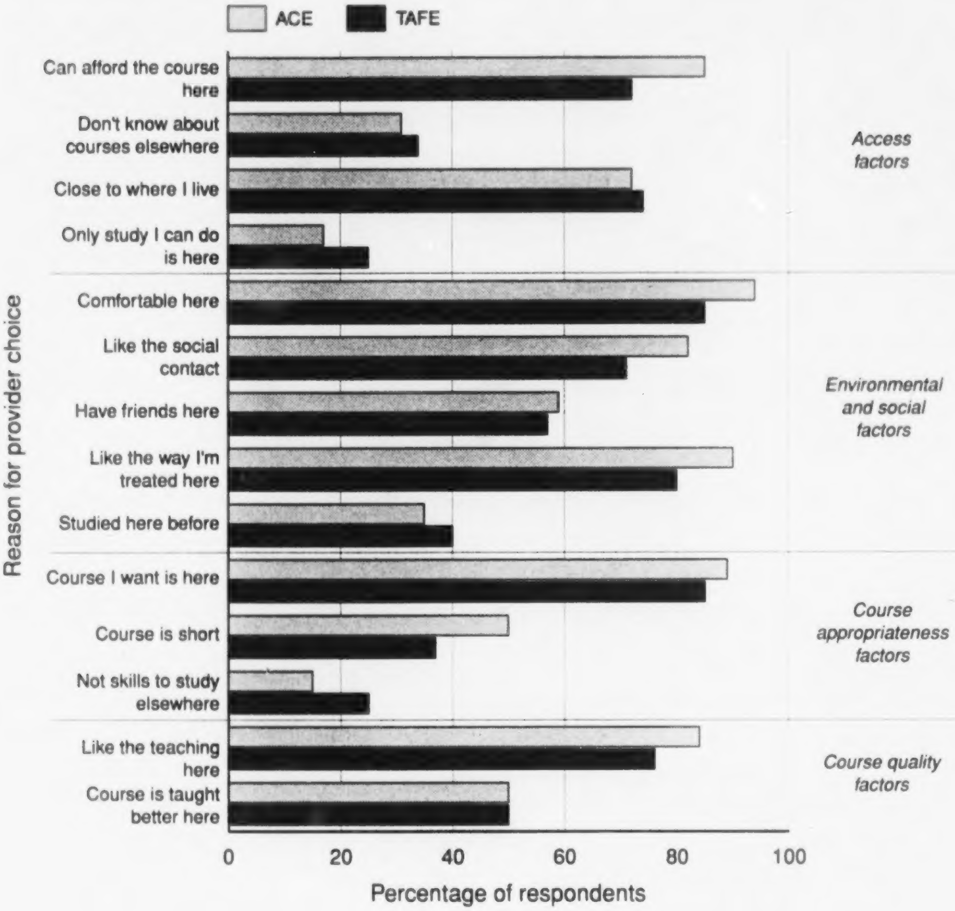
ACE learners (50%) were also more likely than TAFE learners (37%) to report that the short duration of the course was an important factor in their provider choice. This needs to be seen in the context of the greater proportion of ACE learners who were studying in short courses.

TAFE learners indicated two provider choice factors in proportions noticeably higher than ACE learners. These factors were:

- I don't have enough skills to study elsewhere (ACE 14%; TAFE 24%)
- it is the only study I can do (ACE 17%; TAFE 24%)

The low frequency of agreement with these statements by ACE learners challenges the notion that learners choose ACE providers because they are unable to study elsewhere. More than two thirds had previously experienced other post-secondary study environments than ACE. While affordability (85%) and proximity to home (71%) were important access factors for many, the overall picture was one of ACE learners making informed and positive choices of the courses, environments and teaching styles which suited them.

Figure 14: Respondents' reasons for provider choice, by sector



ACE interviewees reported that flexible entry points, the customisation or development of programs and the chance to engage in a range of non-threatening and less formalised learning experiences were particularly important to them. For many, these factors had been a key to their initial participation in adult education.

Formal and informal services offered by ACE providers in parallel with courses, such as on-site childcare, transport to and from classes, counselling, learning support and social interaction opportunities were highly valued by learners. These findings support the definition of 'good practice' proposed by Bradshaw (1995).

> *. . . good practice means contributing to individual and social well-being, simultaneously attending to vocational, personal, family, community and social goals and outcomes.* (p.138)

The following excerpts of interview transcripts illustrate some reasons that learners chose ACE providers and their experiences of study in ACE. While they are grouped under particular issues, it is clear from the learners' stories that in many cases it was a complex interplay of factors rather than a single factor which determined provider selection.

Access factors

Rick, an unemployed man in his thirties, had suffered an injury at work which prevented him from continuing with his previous occupations as a machine operator and truck driver. He spent five years on a disability pension and was very '. . . sick of sitting at home'. His schooling experience had been unsatisfactory and had left him with little confidence in his abilities to undertake formal study. He believed that his study options were limited due to an early departure from school. Post-school study was an unknown experience for Rick when he decided to enrol in an applied electronics course at an inner city ACE provider:

> *I never thought myself suitable for studying. I didn't like school, but this has been good, we've had a bit of a blast! As for TAFE, I couldn't get in because I left school at 14 and to get into TAFE I would have to do Year 10 or Year 12.*

However, Rick reported that his involvement in the applied electronics course at ACE had been positive:

> *. . . a confidence builder, now feel I can go for any job I can put my mind to. After five years sitting at home, never had a résumé in my life but now in a much better position . . . I started to look for work before this course but blew my chances out of the water, I had no résumé. But now, in addition to the technological work, now I know how to put a résumé together and health and safety stuff. They cover industrial health and safety, electrical safety and résumés and all sorts of stuff, not just the electronics.*

Rick valued the practical approach taken by the teacher and the inclusion of additional support which helped him to gain confidence as a learner and prospective worker.

Alison, a single mother in her forties, had studied at university, TAFE and at a SkillShare without gaining a qualification or improving her paid work position. She chose to study at the ACE provider because she was confident that she could gain entry to her chosen course:

> *(I) didn't need a qualification to get in and (it was) free! I've been a single mum for 16 years. I didn't continue with my (painting) studies when my daughter was seven because I had to get a job: did a lot of bar work and office work . . . worked on a mushroom farm for a few years, had an exhibition, sold my painting but couldn't make a living. Improved my office skills but still couldn't get a job. I was a street kid and had a pretty tough life and decided, 'If I couldn't get a job, what could I do?'. Thought I'd become a social worker and help the street kids and the homeless . . . I'm hoping to get into the two year youth work course at TAFE and then get a job in youth work.*

While accessibility was a key factor for Alison's selection of the ACE course, it was nevertheless part of a longer term plan to gain access to a course at TAFE and then a job. For some learners, initial study in ACE was not linked to a longer term plan. However, participation often not only increased confidence but also revealed potential pathways for future study. For other learners, with greater experience of past study, it offered the first steps of a longer, strategically planned journey to work.

Patricia, a woman in her forties, with responsibilities for four children of her own and three step-children varying in age from a few months to 19 years, travelled 22 kms each way to a rural ACE provider. The nearest TAFE provider was 50kms away. She reported that the main factors which prompted her to choose the ACE provider were the:

> *. . . distance, plus the cost, because having a family, how do you save up $500 or $600 before you start? Also they were offering . . . the course that had the qualification.*

For Patricia, the ACE provider offered a course which was closer, cheaper and offered the qualification she sought. While women were more concerned about affordability than men (women 84%; men 66%), the generally cheaper price of ACE courses was valued by many unemployed people, in particular.

Helen, an Aboriginal learner introduced earlier, reported that her access to the course was facilitated by a range of support services offered by the ACE provider:

> *Childcare is right here. I can look out the window and see my child . . . At TAFE I would have had to put him into day care for the whole day—not very flexible. Whereas here, we can have our kids with us. They are really just out the back . . . Transport is not a problem, the bus picks me up.*

Ken, an unemployed man in his thirties, had previously studied at both TAFE and ACE providers. He wanted to undertake a welding course:

> *. . . just to improve my job prospects and I like welding. I worked as a sheet metal worker and welder before and liked it. Now there are new standards and now have to have this theory component to do the welding that I now want to do.*

Ken had been 'in and out of work, part-time jobs'. He had also completed previous study, 'got a certificate in advanced composites and a dental technician by trade . . . did it at TAFE 12 years ago'.

Ken reported that he selected the ACE course because it was:

> *. . . a lot cheaper here. I wanted to do a course for a while and there are welding schools but they are $300 or $600 for a week. If I did it at TAFE (then) only one day a week and will take forever for me. If you're going to learn something, you do it! Could go to TAFE at (town 40 km away) but cheaper, closer here. And much cheaper than a private provider. I need the certificate to branch out into more specialised forms of welding and ultimately to become self-employed.*

The cost of the course was important for Ken, but the fact that it was a short, full-time course and offered the required specialised qualification was also vital for Ken to be able to gain the work he sought.

Course appropriateness

The balance of theory and practice, duration and intensity of the course were important selection factors.

Bob, a school leaver with no previous post-school education, selected a six month intensive electronics course at an ACE provider primarily because he:

> *. . . didn't have grades good enough to go to TAFE, the only way I could have got in there would have been through the work experience, but this covers everything in 12 months instead of everything at different levels over a longer time at TAFE. Here everything is easy to understand and everything is done at once.*

Anna, a woman in her forties, had study backgrounds in ACE, TAFE and university. Her involvement in the adult community centre where she was studying in a group facilitation skills course extended to working at reception, helping with planning and course development. Anna considered that the strengths of the provider were:

> *. . . related to community psychology. Coming from a community base, the community centre is the base. (It is) concerned with the whole person . . . vocational intent is (therefore) not a criterion for involvement.*

Tania, a woman in her forties who had recently completed the same course as Anna at an outer urban ACE provider, reflected on the approach of the provider:

> *The learning focus here is less academic, more personal growth and development focussed. That is the flavour of (the provider) generally.*

When the comments in relation to the delivery of this single course in an ACE provider were analysed, it emerged that some learners valued it because they found it to be 'theoretical'. Some considered it provided more in-depth knowledge than they had received at university. However, others, for example Tania, found the focus to be 'less academic, more personal growth and development focussed'.

A common theme which emerged in the interviews with ACE learners was one of individual attention and support of the teaching. The flexibility of teachers in ACE, consistently reported by learners, accommodated the different pace of learners, allowed for individual concerns to be met and modelled an environment of acceptance and inclusion. This accommodation of differences helped to build learning environments which were comfortable, in which learners felt that they were appropriately treated and where learning was satisfying.

One teacher who taught the same course in both a TAFE setting and an ACE setting reflected on the reasons why her teaching was different in the two settings. She thought it was because in the TAFE environment, she and the students entered what they perceived to be a formal and established environment with certain expectations which included but extended beyond room layout and approach. To change the atmosphere would require more than changing the arrangement of the chairs and tables in the room. There were also expectations about pace and process. In the ACE provider, the teacher reported that she felt that the environment belonged to the learners. They had other business at the community centre. They made her a cup of tea when she arrived. They asked her, with confidence, to help with their concerns. The ACE environment had an 'air' of community ownership which was inclusive of the learners.

Environmental and social factors

A comfortable and social environment and appropriate treatment by staff were highly valued, particularly by ACE learners.

Merle chose a counselling course at a small ACE provider, a community house in an outer urban area because:

> *. . . (the) atmosphere was comfortable and because I had done some of the courses here and like the style . . . friendly, easy-going non-threatening, non-judgemental.*

Merle, like many ACE learners, undertook a vocational course after participating in other courses at the same provider and was better able to cope with study if allowed to progress at her own rate.

Karen, studying in an ACE provider, had previously tried to get into a course in childcare at TAFE after leaving school halfway through Year 10:

> *In the interview (for entry to the TAFE course) I said I had a learning disability and had to fill in the form and had to spell and I just got really upset about it at TAFE. Here, it's a slower learning process. You can take your time.*

Learner-centred, supportive environments in ACE were sought by many learners, including those whose earlier learning experiences had been unsatisfactory and those who had previously experienced extensive and successful periods of study.

Helen, the Aboriginal woman in her thirties, had chosen to enrol in a New Opportunities for Women program with an outer urban ACE provider for a range of reasons. An appropriate environment for Helen was one which supported learners and encouraged a sense of ownership:

> *It's the atmosphere here . . . small and friendly. TAFE is too big, too many people tramping through . . . We had ownership of the program so we even organised lunch. Everyone put money in and two women organised the lunch and any leftover money from the lunches we used to go out to tea at the end of the course, so it was cost effective . . . We had Aboriginal teachers as well. Some think that was important, others don't believe that is the key. You need to have teachers who understand everything first. Important that they are sympathetic.*

For many learners in ACE, an appropriate environment depended on a complex array of factors. Sometimes it was important that the environment did not contain something. For one learner in her forties it was not being 'in an institution full of school leavers'. For a learner who lived in a semi-rural area, it was not having to go 'to study in a suburban part of the world'. For one Aboriginal woman, it was not studying in 'a classroom situation like it was at school and not treated like at school'.

Marion, a woman in her fifties with a science degree, studying in an outer urban ACE provider, reported that she 'had been high school teaching and found it very stressful'. She was at a point in her life when she was:

> *not sure what I would do next . . . I wanted to work with adults rather than with children and wanted to continue to enhance my skills.*

Marion selected the ACE provider for a variety of reasons:

> *I had chronic fatigue and wasn't working and felt I needed to be doing something and this seemed to really suit . . . friendly, not high powered, calmer and something I thought I could cope with at the time. Came 20 kms to the course, I'm not a local . . . Idea was that it was in a community centre rather than in an institution . . . (it was) more comfortable . . . TAFEs are*

> *cold and impersonal spaces. Here the milieu is just so much more conducive and helping you to get over your fears and anxieties.*

Marion reported that while the environment was homely and supportive, the course content was also very important for her.

> *(It was) good because I got a lot more theoretical things I had not got in other courses I'd done, even teaching . . . gained knowledge and competence and confidence as well . . . with the small group we were able to support each other and help each other, and now, I have since facilitated in the program and have work at (Department of Education evening class provider) facilitating programs and working in TAFE. So I have slowly increased the energy I have to work and opportunities have slowly opened up.*

These examples are representative of a cross-section of ACE learners from a range of study backgrounds. Their experiences and perceptions challenge the assumption that it is only disadvantaged learners who need the support of the ACE environment to secure a positive learning outcome.

Course quality

ACE learners were concerned with the quality of the teaching and how well the teacher could address the adult learners' particular needs. ACE participants with prior experience of adult learning environments placed particular importance on the implementation of adult teaching and learning principles. As Teese et al. (1999, p.7) suggest:

> *Adult education has a specifically educationally distinctive tradition. It fosters the development of a self-directed learner identity, and teachers within the ACE context focus their presentation and teaching approach on students' own immediate needs, concerns and capacities.*

Issues of teaching and course quality were raised more often by learners who had experienced other post-school learning environments.

Diane, a primary school teacher with 23 years of experience in the classroom, was studying in an information technology course with a rural ACE provider. She valued 'learning the fun way' and the 'right way of teaching. Not just fun. I want to learn more and more'.

Kara, an ex-teacher in her forties with a university qualification in dentistry, wanted her course in group facilitation skills to have 'an educational base, not just a craft base'. She found that the course she enrolled in at an outer urban ACE provider offered such a base:

> *. . . and also things about the teacher . . . not just a good teacher but also versed in teaching adults from many different backgrounds, able to encompass the knowledge that we carried as adults and incorporate it into the class and the teaching which made us feel very comfortable, made the most of what we know.*

Mary, a woman in her fifties who made a 60 km round trip to study at the rural ACE provider, emphasised that she would not have continued with her Certificate III in Childcare course if she was not:

> *. . . confident that it was as good as any TAFE course. The teacher is now teaching at uni, the same subject . . . and the course is a definite TAFE-*

> *accredited course. (Teachers) were sympathetic to our needs and understand our family needs and give us encouragement and support in a personal way . . . . Also at TAFE (you) get sent all over town for your placement, don't get to choose. Here we can choose and negotiate.*

Marisa, a woman from a non-English-speaking background, had been a registered nurse in a South American country prior to migrating to Australia. She had suffered a stroke which limited her English language ability and her paid employment options. Marisa was studying at a large outer urban ACE provider, motivated by a desire to improve her English in order to work as a volunteer.

> *I live very, very far . . . I leave at 7.00 am. First walk, then catch a bus, then catch a train, then another bus to get here. Nearly two and a half hours to get here. I don't have the courage to go to TAFE because difficult to understand the teacher at TAFE. After the stroke it is difficult to think as well as speak, so I come here.*

Evidence from the survey and interviews indicates that some learners attach particular importance to environmental, access and social factors to enable or encourage them to participate in vocational education opportunities.

Differences by State ACE

Participants in Victorian ACE providers were more likely to have a previous ACE study background (46%) than ACE learners in Queensland and Western Australia (29%). Hence they had better expectations based on prior experience, of what an ACE provider could offer them. They were also more likely to report that they intended to pursue another course at the same provider (61% in Victorian ACE compared with 44% in Queensland and Western Australian ACE) and to work in a course-related area (58% in Victorian ACE compared with 50% in Queensland and Western Australian ACE and 42% in TAFE).

ACE participants, particularly part-timers who made up the greatest proportion (80%) of ACE learners, across the three States, were particularly concerned about affordability and being treated well. Figure 15 shows respondents' reasons for choosing a provider, by TAFE and ACE sub-sector.

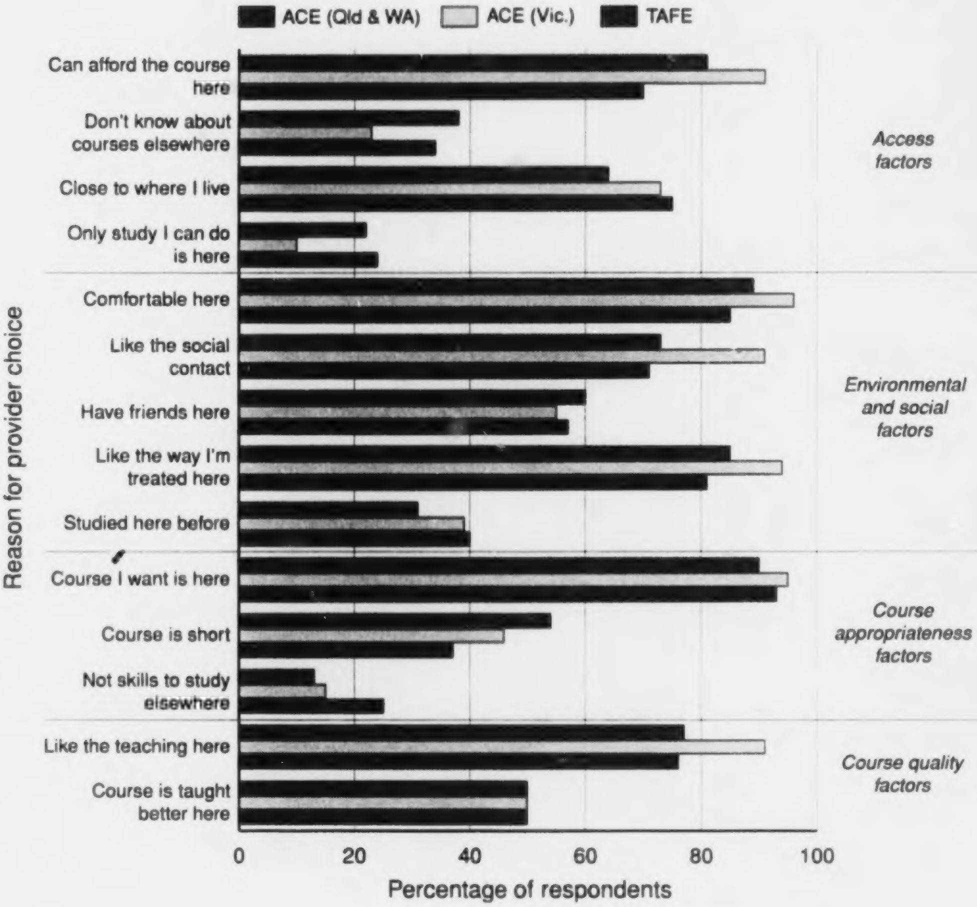
As figure 15 illustrates, some factors were valued more highly by participants in Victorian ACE providers than by participants in ACE in Queensland and Western Australia or by TAFE participants. There were similarities in the provider choice factors for TAFE and Queensland and Western Australian ACE respondents. These factors were:

- affordability (ACE Vic. 91%; ACE Qld & WA 81%; TAFE 70%)
- being treated well (ACE Vic. 94%; ACE Qld & WA 85%; TAFE 81%)
- feeling comfortable (ACE Vic. 96%; ACE Qld & WA 89%; TAFE 85%)
- the social contact (ACE Vic. 91%; ACE Qld & WA 73%; TAFE 71%)
- the teaching (ACE Vic. 91%; ACE Qld & WA 77%; TAFE 76%)

It was also apparent that choices made by Victorian ACE learners were generally informed and positive ones. Survey respondents in Victorian ACE programs were much less likely to report that a factor in their choice of provider was related to the:

- lack of other study options (ACE Vic. 10%; ACE Qld & WA 22%; TAFE 24%)
- lack of knowledge about courses elsewhere (ACE Vic. 23%; ACE Qld & WA 38%; TAFE 34%)

Figure 15: Respondents' reasons for provider choice, by TAFE and ACE sub-sector



Differences by gender

Women returning to study, in both ACE and TAFE, after prolonged but recent periods of caring for their children often expressed a lack of confidence in their abilities as learners. They often had limited time available for study because of the need to accommodate parenting commitments. They valued providers which addressed their access, environmental and social concerns.

Women's concerns with access issues were reflected in their responses in relation to provider choice. In particular, they were more likely than men to identify that they had selected a provider, whether ACE or TAFE, because:

- the course was short (women 49%; men 33%)
- they could afford the course (women 84%; men 66%)
- it was close to where they lived (women 75%; men 69%)

Women generally valued environmental and social factors more highly than men in their selection of provider. In particular, they were more likely to agree with the statements:

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- I feel comfortable here (women 93%; men 83%)
- I like the way they teach here (women 84%; men 72%)
- I like the way I'm treated here (women 89%; men 79%)
- I like the social contact (women 80%; men 70%)

Carol, a long-term unemployed, single mother in her thirties (introduced earlier), talked about the importance, to her, of self-paced learning in a supportive environment. As a new learner, Carol considered that her local ACE provider offered a:

> *. . . more relaxed, casual sort of atmosphere, but at TAFE, night school, atmosphere put me right off, teacher didn't seem approachable, so I just kept my mouth shut and didn't ask anything so I didn't make an idiot of myself, but here I didn't feel like a twit to ask something . . . also because it is self-paced and not exams, you can get it done.*

While Carol's Certificate III in General Education for Adults course was not ostensibly vocational, and her initial participation was motivated by a desire for personal development, her growing confidence prompted consideration of vocational directions:

> *When I started, I didn't want to look too far, I wanted to get confidence in myself, but as time has gone by, I feel a lot more capable and now starting to think, 'Well, what can I do?'. When I left school, I felt I was an idiot and then grew up a bit and thought, 'Here I am, raising a family, I must be a bit capable', and then, when I started, I just wanted to see what I could do, and now I know I am capable and want to know 'What can I do when I grow up?'. I want to be qualified and get a job, don't want to just clean toilets all my life.*

Stories similar to Carol's were reported by many ACE learners who expressed that despite their earlier setbacks, they were determined to succeed as learners in their deliberately chosen ACE environment. Carol concluded that:

> *There should be these sorts of centres and opportunities in every suburb. Because all women want to better themselves, and single dads, and if they knew that here was a place where you could come without pressure and better yourself and learn at your own pace, they would do it!*

The concept of lifelong learning takes on different meanings in particular communities and education sectors. For communities and individuals for whom education has been a positive and enriching experience, the concept refers to the continual enhancement of skills and broadening of qualifications or expertise. For those in the workforce, the concept is more likely to be used in reference to people moving into different occupations or new skill levels within their current occupation.

However, for many of the more disenfranchised learners in ACE settings, lifelong learning may be an alien concept. Their experience of being an ACE learner may be their first introduction to learning which engenders any enthusiasm or confidence in themselves as learners. Carol, quoted above, advocated lifelong learning. However, she acknowledged that, in the absence of an appropriate provider, lifelong learning was not an option for her, nor for other learners with unsatisfactory prior experiences of learning.

It is notable, that while the teaching, comfort, social contact and ways of being treated were less important for men, they were nevertheless identified as important by around three quarters of male learners.

Frank, a long-term unemployed man in his twenties, was interviewed while studying in a three-month intensive welding course at an ACE provider in his rural town. It was the first study Frank had undertaken since leaving school. He emphasised the vocational value to him of an intensive, practical course:

> *. . . you know the standard you can weld to after a course like this and can demonstrate it to an employer . . . It's better doing this too because your time's taken up every day. You work all day and then you're on the routine and tired at the end of the day. It's like working, so helps your self-esteem . . . doing your 38 hours a week, and then when you get a job, you know you can do it because you're used to doing it every day already.*

While affordability was not as important for men as it was for women, nevertheless, two thirds of men reported it as a factor in their selection of provider. Frank reflected the views of most of the group (all men) in his ACE class when he said:

> *If you're on the dole, and even if it's a good course, you can't afford $600 for a course so when something comes up like this that's more realistic, and you can afford it, it's a good investment . . . we're lucky!*

Affordability and the fact that the course was short were key factors for many participants in the ACE welding course.

The ACE provider offered a three-month, full-time, 452-hour accredited course at a concession rate of $170 with overalls and boots included. Provider staff selected eight participants for the course from a waiting list of 25 applicants. Not surprisingly, all the participants considered themselves to be fortunate.

There were some notable differences in provider choice by gender. Women more commonly indicated a preference for particular learning environments. However, similar issues were raised by males, particularly where other social and economic factors were present.

Differences by group

An analysis was undertaken by group attribute (men, women, speaking a language other than English at home, long-term unemployed, first post-secondary course). It revealed that there was minimal variation between the reasons that members of these groups chose ACE providers. Men were less concerned with distance from the course and slightly less concerned with the length of the course than other groups. However, it was notable that the comfort of the environment, the way learners were treated, the teaching and affordability were even more highly valued by all of the sub-groups of learners in vocational education courses than by all learners surveyed (which included those in general preparatory, ALBE and ESL courses).

These access and environmental factors were also important for learners in vocational education courses. However, men in vocational education courses were less concerned than women in these same courses, with proximity of the course to their homes, the availability of the course, the duration of the course and the way they were treated.

Long-term unemployed learners in vocational education courses in ACE were less concerned than members of other groups about the proximity of the course to their homes. However, a short course duration was important.

Notably, people who were speakers of languages other than English at home and who were studying in vocational education courses in ACE most commonly expressed concerns with issues of affordability (96%). All of these learners surveyed (100%) cited comfort and liking the way they were treated as important factors in their selection of an ACE provider.

Learners in vocational education courses in ACE who were working full time were less likely than learners working part time, or not in paid work at all, to be concerned with access issues such as affordability or proximity to home. They were also less concerned with liking the teaching. However, there was minimal variation in the importance given to other factors such as being treated well and the duration of the course.

Learners in vocational education courses in ACE who were working part time, unemployed, looking for work, not looking for work or pensioners indicated the importance of various provider selection factors.

These findings suggest that the holistic approaches which underpin the delivery of vocational programs by ACE providers are valued by all learners. They are even more highly valued by women and learners who are disadvantaged by language difficulties or social and economic factors. Holistic approaches of a similar nature could usefully be applied to the delivery of vocational education and training in other settings.

What were learners' projected outcomes?

An understanding of learner intentions following completion of the course can be drawn from an analysis of respondents' projected, likely outcomes.

Close to half of all learners in ACE (53%) and TAFE (50%) reported that, after completion of their current course, they were likely to 'start another course here, at this provider'. Similar proportions in both sectors predicted that they were likely to 'not do any further study' (12% of ACE and 16% of TAFE respondents). However, TAFE learners (40%) were more likely to anticipate starting 'a TAFE or other accredited work-related course' than ACE learners (32%), while ACE learners (33%) were more likely to start a 'general interest course' than TAFE learners (26%).

Notably, the most common projected outcome for ACE learners was work in an area related to their course. A higher proportion of ACE respondents (54%) reported that they were likely to 'work in a course-related area' than TAFE respondents (42%). This was despite the fact that the TAFE learners surveyed were, overall, studying in higher level courses than ACE respondents, and presumably, would be better qualified to gain work on completion.

If vocational intent can be measured by indicators such as the motivational reasons (job orientation) and likely projected outcomes (work in a course-related area) used in this study, then more than half of the ACE learners surveyed across three States demonstrated vocational intent in relation to their study. They demonstrated this intent as frequently as TAFE respondents.

Ruby was an Aboriginal woman in her twenties. English was neither her first language nor the language she spoke at home. She was studying with an outer urban community centre which offered a program specifically for Aboriginal women. She explained that coming to study at the ACE centre had been a:

> *. . . bridge to going to TAFE. I never really thought about going back to school, but through doing this course, the NOW (New Opportunities for Women) course, helped me to go back to TAFE . . . I have two children. First up it was about getting out of the house, so first it was about the craft, but having the childcare here and then the course was available and meeting new people here as well . . .*

Martin, unemployed, in his thirties and living in an urban area, chose to study in a combination of ACE and TAFE courses to maximise his job prospects. He regarded the ACE provider as:

> *. . . pretty much the only place accessible to me (full time). To do electronics at TAFE as a day course, have to have an apprenticeship.*

When asked about how the two courses related to each other, Martin explained that, at TAFE, he spent:

> *. . . a lot more time with theory but this (ACE course) is more practical . . . more job oriented, more broad-based for more areas of work . . . It would take four years to have the coverage at TAFE as you get here in six months . . .*

He emphasised that he hoped his study in both the ACE and TAFE courses would lead to '. . . fulfilling employment'.

Stephanie, a non-English-speaking background woman in her thirties, was living in a semi-rural area, studying for a Childcare Certificate III at her local community centre and working part time in her local childcare centre. She described the pathway that had led her to this course in ACE.

> *I started at the (adult community education) centre many years ago just doing craft courses and things like that . . . interested in the garden at home. Saw the horticulture course advertised and started (that). Did three units and then kids had gone to school and position had come up at the local kindergarten and I thought I should go to that stream and get a qualification and there was a course offered here in Cert. II in Childcare . . . (I'm) now helping out working with (another learner) at the (local) childcare centre.*

Stephanie had a clear vision of where she was headed vocationally.

> *. . . doing my Certificate (III) in Childcare and then do my diploma and then become a co-ordinator of a centre!*

Martin, Stephanie and Ruby, through their stories, illustrate the complex combination of factors which attract and support participation in VET in ACE providers.

Differences by gender

There were variations in the outcomes that respondents anticipated by gender. However, these differences varied according to whether learners were studying in Victorian ACE or Queensland and Western Australian ACE.

Women studying in ACE in Victoria, in all courses surveyed, were more likely than men to predict that, following completion of their course, they would work in a course-related area (women 62%; men 41%).

A similar variation was evident when only those women and men enrolled in vocational courses in Victorian ACE were considered. Women were more likely than men to predict that, following completion of their course, they would:

- work in a course-related area (women 71%; men 53%)
- enter a TAFE or other accredited work-related course (women 40%; men 21%)

While it appears from these findings that the ACE sector in Victoria may be serving the vocational needs of women more effectively than those of men, the proportion of Victorian ACE women studying in vocational education courses was much higher: 76 per cent compared with only 50 per cent of the men in the Victorian ACE sample. One third of the sample of men in Victorian ACE were studying in general preparatory courses.

Differences by group, by sector

Learners studying in ACE in Victoria, across all the courses surveyed, were more likely to predict work in a course-related outcome than learners in ACE in other States if they were:

- women
- long-term unemployed people
- speakers of a language other than English at home
- in their first post-secondary course

Figure 16 shows group membership by sector and State ACE sub-sector for respondents in all courses whose projected outcome following completion of the course was *work in a course-related area.*

These findings suggest that learners who belong to groups considered to be disadvantaged as learners are projecting much higher levels of vocational outcomes in the Victorian sub-sector compared to TAFE and the Queensland and Western Australian ACE sub-sector. It is important to recognise that almost two thirds (64%) of the Victorian ACE group 'enrolled in first post-secondary course' were older than 30 years of age. As figure 16 shows, there are again, clear parallels between projected outcomes in TAFE and Queensland and Western Australian ACE, compared to Victorian ACE.

Figure 17 shows group membership by sector and State ACE sub-sector for respondents in vocational education courses whose projected outcome following completion of the course was *work in a course-related area.*

There was less clarity in the patterns of projected outcomes by sub-sector when the comparison was narrowed down to participants in vocational education courses. It is notable that equal proportions of long-term unemployed respondents expected that the course would prepare them for work in a related area regardless of provider or sector.

Figure 16: Respondents' (in all courses) with projected outcome: *work in a course-related area* by group membership by sector and ACE sub-sector

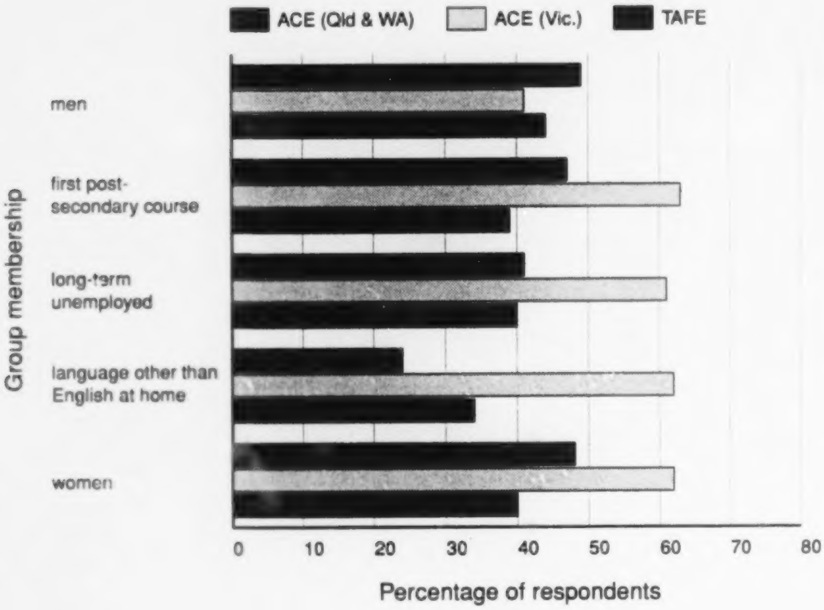
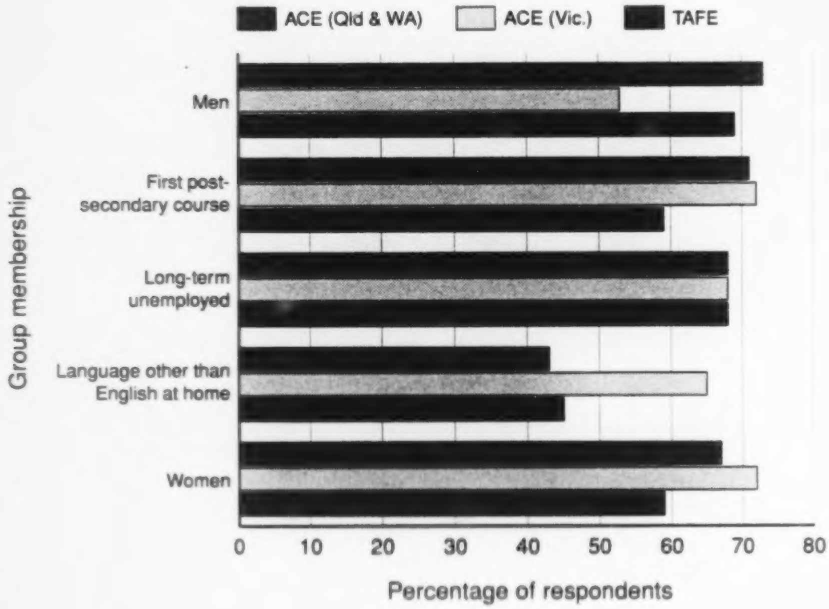


Figure 17: Respondents' (in vocational courses only) with projected outcome: *work in a course-related area* by group membership by sector



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However, women and those studying in post-secondary education for the first time were more likely to anticipate working in a course-related area if they were studying in ACE in Victoria, Queensland or Western Australia. Learners who spoke a language other than English at home were again much more likely to predict this outcome if they were studying in Victorian ACE (65%) than in TAFE (45%) or in ACE in Queensland or Western Australia (43%). However, it should be noted that the numbers of respondents in this case were small.

Long-term unemployed learners in TAFE indicated the strongest intention, of all groups and sectors, to pursue further study relating to their current course. However, it is possible that this was influenced by the fact that a higher proportion of learners sampled in TAFE were in basic or preparatory education courses, which were intended to provide literacy, numeracy and basic education skills as a first step into specific vocational training.

Victorian ACE learners in their first post-secondary course reported clear intentions of continuing with further study following completion of their course. This may have been because they represented, in general, an older age group than initial post-secondary learners in other States. However, it might also reflect other factors such as:

- the high level of satisfaction derived from study which was also reported
- availability of courses in an established ACE sector
- a general trend of undertaking ongoing study reported by ACE learners in Victoria

Summary

ACE across States

There were observable differences in structure, definitions and community perceptions of ACE provision and ACE learners in the three States which were the focus of this research project.

Policy, structure and definitional differences have an impact at the provider level on the extent and nature of vocational education for adult learners. They also impact on the role and capacity of providers to deliver nationally recognised vocational education.

ACE providers were motivated to engage in vocational education delivery by a range of factors including:

- policies of funding body
- community demand
- recognition of the capacity of providers to deliver vocational education programs
- the possibility of accessing new markets through such delivery

Learners in ACE

Learners studying in ACE courses were:

- from a broad cross-section of the community, prior study backgrounds and occupations
- generally older than learners in TAFE
- more likely to be women
- more likely than TAFE learners to be unemployed and looking for work
- more likely than TAFE learners to be on a pension or doing voluntary or unpaid work
- if employed concurrently with their course, more likely to be working part time rather than full time in one of a broad range of occupations and much less likely than TAFE learners to be manual or semi-skilled workers
- if unemployed, likely to have previously been working in a manual or semi-skilled occupation

There is evidence of much movement between ACE and TAFE in both directions. About four out of ten ACE learners had prior experience of TAFE programs. Around one third of ACE learners had prior university study backgrounds. By comparison, around one half of TAFE learners had prior TAFE experience and around one third had prior ACE experience. Nevertheless, around one third of learners in both sectors were undertaking their first post-secondary study.

However, many of the ACE interviewees who cited previous TAFE study experience, had commenced access and other low-level courses in TAFE but had not completed them. Many had left school early, dissatisfied with the experience and had later attempted to pick up their study in access and preparatory or literacy and numeracy courses in TAFE, but had experienced similar difficulties. Some had commenced university access courses, with similar lack of success. While clearly motivated to learn, they had been unable to find an appropriate context within which they could be adequately catered for, to achieve success as learners.

Vocational courses in ACE

The course sample surveyed in ACE in the three States included the full range from non-accredited vocational education courses to Certificate IV courses. Almost 60 per cent of survey respondents were studying in accredited courses, a quarter of them at Certificate Level II and above. However, 72 per cent of interviewees (64 individuals) in Victorian ACE were studying at Certificate Level II and above.

Learners studying in ACE vocational education courses were:

- more likely to be studying part time than full time
- more likely than TAFE learners to be in courses of short duration (shorter than six months)

There was minimal variation, within the sample of respondents in this study, in the type of courses that women and men were studying in ACE.

Learners' reasons for study

There was little variation in the reasons why ACE learners and TAFE learners chose to study. ACE learners studying in vocational education, general preparatory, ALBE and ESL courses were motivated to study mainly for the following five reasons:

- because the content interested them (89%)
- mainly for the knowledge or skills (88%)
- because the class time suited them (67%)
- to help them perform a greater range of jobs (66%)
- because the course was at the right level for them (64%)

Learners studying in vocational education courses demonstrated an even stronger learning orientation and an increased emphasis on multi-skilling, gaining a qualification and satisfaction from study.

TAFE learners indicated two provider choice factors in proportions noticeably higher than ACE learners. These factors were:

- I don't have enough skills to study elsewhere (ACE 14%; TAFE 24%)
- it is the only study I can do (ACE 17%; TAFE 24%)

The low frequency of agreement with these statements by ACE learners challenges the notion that learners choose ACE providers because they are unable to study elsewhere.

The suitability of class time was an important factor in providing access for ACE learners.

Analysis of the survey data indicated that where there was recognition of, and support for, ACE sector delivery of VET, learners had expectations that their VET study options would be available at convenient times, and at levels appropriate to their educational needs. That is, where there was an established culture of vocational education provision in ACE providers, those communities demanded that relevant and accessible VET provision was offered in a form which was most appropriate to their learning needs.

There were differences, by gender, in the reasons that learners studied in ACE courses. Men were more likely than women to be doing their course because of a job or work orientation or to get a qualification. Women were more likely to be studying because of a desire to learn and were more concerned with access issues: having a course that was at the right level and at a suitable time.

When the responses of ACE learners in vocational education and training courses were separated for analysis, the following trends emerged.

- Being able to perform a greater range of jobs was the most common reason for study in VET programs for both men and women, but reported more commonly by women than men.
- Having a course at the right level was the most common reason reported by people in VET programs who spoke a language other than English at home. It was also an important reason for women, long-term unemployed people and those commencing their first post-secondary course.
- Suitability of class time was far more important for women than for men in vocational education courses. Women who were speakers of a language other than English at home or who were in their first post-secondary course were even more concerned that the class time suited them.

Learners' reasons for choice of provider

Choice of provider, for ACE learners, was primarily linked to the quality of teaching and environmental and social factors. The most important of these factors were feeling positive about:

- the teaching
- the setting
- being treated in a preferred way
- social contact

Access issues were also important considerations for ACE learners, particularly course availability and affordability.

The overall picture was one of ACE learners making informed and positive choices of the courses, environments and teaching styles which suited them. While these factors were critical, ACE was not seen by learners as a provider of last resort. ACE learners, particularly those who had been long-term unemployed and were seeking to improve their job prospects, valued practical 'hands on' approaches and supportive environments which assisted them to gain confidence and competence.

There were evident differences between ACE learners in Victoria and those in Queensland and Western Australia. Participants in Victorian ACE providers were more likely than those in Queensland or Western Australian ACE providers to:

- be well informed about study options and availability of courses in other providers
- have had prior study experience in ACE
- be intending to pursue further courses with the same provider
- anticipate work in a course-related area following completion of their course

Women were more likely than men to be concerned with access issues in their choice of ACE provider. In particular, women in ACE indicated their concerns about:

- affordability
- proximity of the course to their home
- a short duration of the course

Women also valued environmental and social factors more highly than men in their choice of provider. However, these factors were also very important to men studying in ACE.

Many participants in vocational education programs from different study backgrounds made a conscious decision to study at an ACE provider specifically because of the environment and capacity of those providers to fit in with personal circumstances of the learners. It was not only learners with poor schooling experiences or those who were socially and economically disadvantaged who sought out the particular learning environment that ACE offered. It also included a range of learners for whom the values and philosophies of ACE providers complemented their learning experience.

These findings suggest that the holistic approaches which underpinned the delivery of vocational programs by ACE providers were valued by all learners. They were even more highly valued by women and learners who were disadvantaged by language difficulties or social and economic factors.

Learners' projected outcomes

The majority of learners in the ACE courses surveyed (and considerably higher proportion than TAFE learners surveyed) projected that they were likely to work in a field related to their course upon completion. Women were much more likely than men to anticipate this outcome.

Notably, women studying in vocational education programs in Victorian ACE providers were much more likely than men (and more likely than women in vocational education courses in ACE providers in other States) to predict that they would work in a course-related area or that they would proceed to a TAFE or other accredited work-related course.

Learners studying in ACE in Victoria, across all the courses surveyed, were more likely to predict work in a course-related area as an outcome than learners in ACE in other States if they were:

- women
- long-term unemployed
- speakers of a language other than English at home
- enrolled in their first post-secondary course

Conclusions

Accredited vocational education and training (VET) programs in community-owned and managed (ACE) contexts in Australia form an important part of ACE and VET provision in Australia, even in situations where a formally defined and recognised ACE 'sector' is not present. A diverse array of community providers, united in their commitment to access, flexibility and responsiveness, have been attractive to a range of students seeking primarily vocational outcomes.

This study provides evidence of the capacity of the ACE sector to:

- address learning environment and access issues while effectively delivering vocational outcomes
- offer initial and lifelong learning opportunities which provide bridges to further study for learners, both within ACE and to other providers
- foster diversity and responsiveness to local demand in communities through community ownership and management
- respond flexibly to the learning needs of specific groups of learners
- attract and cater for a diverse range of learners seeking quality VET outcomes

These capacities give the ACE sector a valid and valuable place in the national and State training systems.

Kearns (1998, p.9) drew attention to 'the growing significance of attitudinal factors as a key to an individual's capability for lifelong learning' and raised the question of 'how best to foster motivation and desire for learning, and qualities such as self-esteem and confidence which support the lifelong learner' (p.9).

This study provides evidence of the capacity of the ACE sector to effectively address these learner needs and to help learners to link together learning, work and social activity in a way which encourages lifelong learning.

The attractions of vocationally oriented programs delivered in ACE were found to parallel, but to be somewhat different from, similar programs delivered in TAFE providers. Community provision as a source of learning was actively sought out by a wide range of adults. While ACE provides considerable benefits to disadvantaged groups, many people with a substantial prior educational background also choose to make use of ACE. Sometimes, the reasons ACE participants engaged in learning differed from the reasons that learners engaged in study in TAFE. The teaching, the setting, the proximity and the timing were all critical factors in the choice of an ACE provider.

This study provides evidence from a learner perspective that the ACE sector offers particularly user-friendly, flexible and vocationally oriented initial and recurrent learning opportunities. Learners surveyed and interviewed in accredited programs in this study in ACE and TAFE providers otherwise had somewhat similar requirements and vocational expectations.

However learner expectations of vocational outcomes were not restricted to specifically VET programs. Learners' motivations and perceptions presented in this study confirm the conceptual inadequacy associated with insisting '. . . upon differentiating between educational programs on the grounds of their perceived vocational orientation' (SEETRC 1997, p.3). Vocational intentions reside within individuals rather than within particular programs.

The evidence presented in this study is of learners actively choosing ACE in order to achieve a set of personal, social and vocational goals rather than just one goal. The prerequisites are clear: a course at the right level, at the right time and delivered in a manner appropriate to the individual.

The study also clearly confirms that many ACE learners in VET programs are far from new to the world of work. In many cases, learners were using ACE as part of a wider strategy to achieve vocational change: to change vocational direction, to perform a current job better or undertake a greater range of jobs. A common anticipated outcome was a wider range of vocational choices.

There were clear differences between the perceptions of ACE learners in Victoria, where a coherent community-owned and managed ACE sector was publicly supported and ACE learners in Queensland and Western Australia where this support was less apparent. There was evidence that policy and funding coherence in Victorian ACE flowed through to learner experience. In particular, it was more likely to provide an affordable, accredited course at the right level, at the right time, and in a manner particularly attractive to women, long-term unemployed and people from a non-English-speaking background seeking a vocational outcome.

There has been much written about pathways out of ACE. This study identifies that important bridges between courses exist within sectors as well as between sectors. Further, ACE learners move to and from university as well as TAFE. People enrolled in VET programs in both ACE and TAFE sectors often have considerable experience in both sectors. In the case of many ACE learners, this experience includes study in a university. It is critical for such lifelong learners that the experience of study be personally rewarding, positive, social and affirming, as well as being vocationally useful. It is also important that further opportunities for study are available to support learners who gain a subsequent job or provide personal and social affirmation for those who are unable to find employment.

In this sense, it is important to see VET programs as an important part of, rather than as a substitute for, other forms of ACE provision. Just as there are 'unhelpful divisions—between private gain and social benefits; between the market and the domestic spheres; between men's work and women's work; between short-term interests and long-term gains' (SEETRC 1997, p.3), there are also unhelpful divisions between accredited vocational and other ACE programs.

VET in ACE provision challenges this distinction from a learner perspective. For many ACE learners, non-vocational programs not only contribute to the development of recreational and personal skills, but may also lead to unforeseen vocational outcomes. Conversely, vocational programs often lead to an improvement of personal well-being and self-esteem.

There is evidence that the capacity of ACE providers to respond flexibly to community demand broadens the opportunities for communities and individuals to achieve vocational outcomes through participation in VET or in other vocational education options. Participation in ACE courses, whether VET or other course types, is seen by participants as meeting confidence-building and self-esteem needs and providing access to a broad range of avenues including personal, social and vocational ones. However, as long as there is a reliance on, and perhaps a greater valuing of, programs which are perceived to lead directly to job outcomes, the contribution which ACE providers make to the education and training systems across Australia will be limited in its perceived value and support, despite the views of the learners themselves.

Industry-recognised skills and program accreditation (as well as associated employability and competitive advantage) are important and positive outcomes for some learners in VET programs. For others, what learners need most in order to gain, regain or keep a job is the feeling of inclusion and self-worth, as well as the confidence and flexibility to learn to keep learning. These vocational attributes, associated with and acquired through learning, are often socially, culturally and community mediated processes. In this sense, a feeling of 'belonging' in ACE has vocational benefits.

ACE provider representatives surveyed rarely reported that their decisions to offer accredited provision were driven by industry and enterprise demand. However, their knowledge of local communities, including enterprises as well as their understanding of the aspirations of learners in those communities increased their capacity to plan responsive and flexible VET provision to offer ACE participants a range of options in a diverse and competitive labour market.

The commitment to addressing the learning needs of local communities strengthens access for learners who may not consider study in more formal settings or initially have the capacity to study at higher levels. ACE providers tend to focus on the needs of the learner or learning communities first, then plan to deliver a range of programs to address these needs. When new learning needs or groups of learners emerge, ACE providers can be well positioned to respond and deliver appropriate programs.

In effect, ACE provision offers learners attractions which include but go beyond a narrow conception of VET. The findings from this study confirm that people are rarely seeking only one specific vocational skill, or set of skills, for a very specific job. They also need knowledge and understanding of the newly emerging world of part-time and fragmented work, with its emphasis on initiative, multi-skilling, networking and flexibility.

While in some States (and parts of the broader education sector) there is an assumption that ACE providers do not want or do not have the capacity to manage and deliver VET provision, the research shows that this is not always the case. There is evidence that ACE providers have both the willingness and capacity to engage in a range of adult education provision, including the delivery of accredited and non-accredited vocational education courses.

However, without specific support from State training authorities, some providers find it difficult to demonstrate the capacity to address the same quality assurance and compliance mechanisms as TAFE institutes and private providers. Addressing the requirements for registration to deliver accredited VET courses may be difficult in financial and bureaucratic terms.

ACE providers have made deliberate decisions to incorporate VET delivery into their adult education programs. Delivery of VET in adult community education settings is occurring in all three States which were the focus of the research, regardless of whether there is a formalised sector, as in Victoria, or not. That is, where providers have made deliberate planning choices and have attained registration and approval to deliver accredited VET programs, there are learners wishing to take up the opportunities for study. Providers have demonstrated the capacity to successfully tender for this delivery in the VET market and to meet required quality audit standards.

Levels of funding and the policies which underpin guidelines for State and national funding opportunities implicitly shape the proportion, and sometimes the availability, of VET provision in ACE settings. These factors may be more influential than level of provider expertise or willingness to offer VET programs. The opportunity to access funding and the presence of statewide structures which give recognition to the ACE sector, as a provider of VET, result in a higher incidence of VET provision.

Gaining recognition at community and government levels of the capacity of ACE providers to successfully deliver VET is an on-going challenge in States where there is no formalised sector. In turn, without this recognition, opportunities for funding to support entry into VET provision are limited.

The relationship between VET provision and ACE philosophy, and achieving the balance between VET and less formal provision pose further challenges for providers. Further, the very features, including learner centredness, flexibility and less institutionalised venues and procedures, which are characteristic of ACE provision, and most valued by learners, can act as a disadvantage for the provider when marketing the capacity of ACE to deliver quality VET to industry and enterprises.

The size and level of funding of many ACE providers has an impact on their capacity to deliver VET in terms of workload and administrative duties. This becomes an issue for providers in determining the proportion of their delivery which will be taken up with the more formalised, training oriented nature of accredited VET provision. Managers and tutors in ACE settings tend to make these decisions on the basis of their relationship to the lifestyle and issues relevant to that community, or as a mechanism for providing tangible pathways and relevant outcomes for learners in their communities.

One of the recognised strengths of the ACE sector is its skill in working with educationally and socially disadvantaged learners, yet this also presents a further challenge for the sector in that these learners often need a significantly longer time in adult education settings before achieving outcomes which are currently recognised as vocational. However, as the transcripts cited in this study illustrate, these learners are not without ambition or vocational aspirations and the ACE sector has an important role to play in supporting their quest for achievement.

This study provides evidence, from a learner perspective, that ACE has the capacity to:

- implement lifelong learning principles in their broadest sense
- play an important part in vocational orientation and preparation
- address multiple needs of diverse learners
- anticipate and value diverse outcomes
- motivate and empower adult learners
- broaden choices available to adult learners

These findings reinforce some of the policy implications identified within *Beyond Cinderella* (SEETRC 1997, chapter 1) in relation to lifelong learning. In particular, this report reinforces:

- the need, through ACE, to affirm lifelong learning '. . . as the fundamentally necessary attribute of Australia's national education and training system' (SEETRC 1997, p.3)
- the conceptual inadequacy of policy and funding mechanisms '. . . which differentiate between education programs on the basis of their perceived or declared vocational orientation' (SEETRC 1997, p.3)
- the importance of education and training in ACE which anticipates and delivers multiple, valid and highly desirable outcomes (SEETRC 1997, p.7)
- the attraction of ACE as a community site to address the multiple needs of individuals, workers and communities (SEETRC 1997, p.9)
- the value in an ACE context of learning to learn, being motivated and having confidence to learn and continuing to learn (Kearns 1998, p.7)

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Appendices

1. ACE and TAFE providers which assisted with the research
2. Questionnaire to ACE and TAFE learners
3. Questionnaire to ACE providers and staff

Appendix 1
ACE and TAFE providers which assisted with the research

Ballarat East Community House
Ballarat University of the Third Age
Baramba Aboriginal Community Care Agency
Bendigo Community House
Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE
BRACE – Ballarat
Brisbane Institute of TAFE
Brisbane Migrant Resource Centre
Castlemaine Continuing Education
Community Training Centre, Kingaroy
Continuing Education Bendigo
Diamond Valley Learning Centre
Geographe Training, Busselton
Gurwidj Neighbourhood House
Inala Community House
Kangan Batman Institute of TAFE
Koondoola Neighbourhood House
Lady Gowrie Centre, Karrawarra
Learning Centre Link
Logan TAFE, Loganholme
Midland College of TAFE
Moreland Adult Education
Nillumbik Living and Learning Centre, Panton Hill
Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE
Olympic Adult Education, West Heidelberg
Open Learning Institute of TAFE
Peel Training and Employment

Perth ITeC

School of Mines, Ballarat

South West Institute of TAFE, Busselton

Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE, Kingaroy

The Homestead, Beldon Community Centre

West Coast College of TAFE, Small Business Institute

Whittlesea Living and Learning Centre

Youth Sector Training Council Queensland

Appendix 2
Questionnaire to ACE and TAFE learners

Survey of experience of courses in Adult Community Education Centre and TAFE Colleges, 1998

Dear Student

We are seeking your responses to the attached survey. We are interested in learning about your experience of the course you have recently been studying.

What we want to know

Our research is trying to work out how community-owned and managed vocational education and training courses differ from similar courses in TAFE. The survey questions ask you about

- your 1998 study
- any previous study you may have done
- why you are doing your course
- what you think may be the outcomes of this study for you
- why you are doing your study with this provider, and
- a few questions about you, to help us have a better idea of your circumstances.

All the information you provide will be completely confidential. We hope that the results will help to inform policies for supporting community-based and TAFE programs.

To return the survey to us

If you have been given the survey in class, please complete it and hand it back to your teacher and they will send it back to us.

Or

If you have been given the survey together with an addressed reply-paid envelope, or received it in the mail, please complete it, place it in the envelope and post it as soon as possible. You do NOT need to attach a stamp and there will be no cost to you.

We really appreciate your taking the time to answer our questions. Our research cannot be completed without your help!

Thanks again

Veronica Volkoff, Barry Golding and Julie Jenkin

The delivery of vocational education and training programs by adult and community education providers - an NREC Project 1998

Veronica Volkoff, RMIT Department of Industry, Professional and Adult Education, PO Box 71,
BUNDOORA VIC 3083 Tel: 03 99257823 Fax: 03 99257818 Email: volkoff@rmit.edu.au

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Survey of experience of courses in Adult Community Education Centres and TAFE Colleges, 1998

1. Some questions about your 1998 Study

Please tick the boxes and complete the following statements as they apply to you.

I am currently studying ☐ full- time ☐ part-time ☐ not studying

My present course is

COURSE NAME ....
(eg Horticulture, Computing, Literacy)

LEVEL ....
(eg Certificate, Diploma)

PROVIDER ....
(eg Sunshine Skills Centre, Bendigo TAFE)

The town or suburb where this course is offered is ....

The distance I travel from home to this course is about ....*kms*

This course is usually completed within

1 month ☐ 3 months ☐ 6 months ☐ 1 year ☐ more than 1 year ☐

I travel to from home to this course by walking ☐ bus ☐ own car ☐ train ☐ other.........

2. Some questions about your previous studies

Please tick beside the statements below and answer any of the questions which apply to you

I have done other courses since leaving school ☐ yes ☐ no

I am now studying for the first time since leaving school ☐ yes ☐ no

I have previously studied at an Adult Community Education Centre, Neighbourhood House, WEA, CAE or similar ☐ yes ☐ no

If yes, please give the name of the last course studied at such as provider ....

I have previously studied at TAFE ☐ yes ☐ no

If yes, please give the name of the last course studied at TAFE ....

I have previously studied at University ☐ yes ☐ no

If yes, please give the name of the last course studied at University ....

PLEASE RETURN TO: Veronica Volkoff
RMIT Department of Industry, Professional and Adult Education, P O Box 71, BUNDOORA, VIC 3083
Tel: 03 9925 7823 Fax: 03 9925 7818 Email: volkoff@rmit.edu.au

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3. Questions about why you are doing your course

Please indicate, by circling the number, whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

I am doing this course . . .	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Not Applicable
because I am trying to get a job	1	2	3	4
because the content interests me	1	2	3	4
in order to get into another course	1	2	3	4
mainly to get a qualification	1	2	3	4
mainly for the knowledge or skills	1	2	3	4
because it builds on my previous study	1	2	3	4
to help me work for myself	1	2	3	4
because it's at the right level for me	1	2	3	4
to get more skills for my present job	1	2	3	4
because my employer wants me to	1	2	3	4
because the class time suits me	1	2	3	4
to help me perform a greater range of jobs	1	2	3	4
to fill in time while I decide what to do next	1	2	3	4
because I get a lot of satisfaction from studying	1	2	3	4

4. Questions about your likely course outcomes

Thinking about the future, after you have completed your current course, how likely are you to do the following?

I will . . .	Likely	Unsure	Probably not	Not Applicable
start another course here, with this provider	1	2	3	4
start a TAFE or other accredited, work related course	1	2	3	4
start a general interest course	1	2	3	4
not do any further study	1	2	3	4
work in an area related to my current course	1	2	3	4

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5. Questions about why you are doing your course here, rather than somewhere else

Please indicate, by circling the number whether you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

I am studying here, with this provider because....	Agree	Unsure	Disagree	Not Applicable
I like the way they teach here	1	2	3	4
I feel comfortable here	1	2	3	4
the course I want to do is offered here	1	2	3	4
the course is short	1	2	3	4
I think the course is taught better here	1	2	3	4
I like the social contact	1	2	3	4
I can afford the course here	1	2	3	4
I don't know about the courses offered elsewhere	1	2	3	4
it is close to where I live	1	2	3	4
I have friends here	1	2	3	4
I have studied here before	1	2	3	4
it is the only study I can do	1	2	3	4
I like the way I'm treated here	1	2	3	4
I have enough skills to study elsewhere	1	2	3	4
another reason... *(please explain)*				

Please add anything else about your course or why you are doing it that we may not have asked you.

....

....

....

....

....

....

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6. Some questions about you

Please tick the boxes beside each statement and answer any of the questions which apply to you.

I am	☐ female	☐ male

My age is under 20 ☐ 20 - 29 ☐ 30 - 39 ☐ 40 - 49 ☐ 50 - 59 ☐ over 60 ☐

I was born in a country other than Australia	☐ yes	☐ no
One (or both) of my parents were born in a country other than Australia	☐ yes	☐ no
I mainly speak a language other than English at home	☐ yes	☐ no
I am an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person	☐ yes	☐ no
I have a significant and permanent disability which may affect my performance in the course	☐ yes	☐ no

The distance from home to the nearest place I can do any education or training course is about ....*kms*

My home postcode is ....

7. Some questions about your work or other activities

Please tick the boxes beside each statement and complete any details which apply to you.

I am working full-time	☐ yes	.... occupation	☐ no
I am working part-time	☐ yes	.... occupation	☐ no

I am not working but looking for work	☐ yes	☐ no
I am not working and not looking for work	☐ yes	☐ no
I was unemployed for 6 months before I started this course	☐ yes	☐ no

If you are not working but have previously worked, please give your most recent occupation .... most recent occupation

I am working in a volunteer or un-paid capacity	☐ yes	☐ no
I am retired	☐ yes	☐ no
I am on a pension	☐ yes	☐ no
I have never had a paid job	☐ yes	☐ no

Thank you very much for completing this survey and returning it to us. Our research cannot be completed without your valuable help. We hope that the advice we provide, based on our research, will help to improve future delivery of education and training programs. Thanks again!

Veronica Volkoff, Barry Golding and Julie Jenkin

Appendix 3
Questionnaire to ACE providers and staff

The delivery of vocational education and training programs by adult and community education providers - an NREC Project 1998

Dear

We are writing to you as the person who recently assisted us to conduct interviews and/or to distribute questionnaires to students in your programs as part of our research. We greatly appreciate and thank you and your students for your assistance, and repeat our undertaking to provide you with a full copy of the final report (and a summary report to any interested interviewees who volunteered names and addresses).

We have now completed our interviews with students in a wide range of programs in Western Australia, Queensland and Victoria.

We are now seeking to complete our research by obtaining a **provider** perspective on some of the delivery issues. We have enclosed a *total of three* questionnaires for completion by yourself and randomly chosen members of your staff. Please ensure that at least one of these is completed by a co-ordinator or manager, and at least one by a teacher or tutor. *The questionnaires on green paper are for managers and co-ordinators, those on blue paper are for tutors.*

We would greatly appreciate it if you and your staff return the completed questionnaires by the end of November.

The aim of this Provider Questionnaire is to get organisational and individual staff member perspectives of some of the issues affecting program choice.

We have supplied reply paid envelopes for returning completed questionnaires. As with the student questionnaires, we do not require names. To further safeguard your confidentiality we have not requested any details which would identify yourself or the name of your provider.

We believe some important information will come from (and be fed back to) you.

Thank you again for assisting with this research.

Veronica Volkoff, Barry Golding and Julie Jenkin

Veronica Volkoff, RMIT Department of Industry, Professional and Adult Education, PO Box 71,
BUNDOORA VIC 3083 Tel: 03 99257823 Fax: 03 99257818 Email: volkoff@rmit.edu.au

Provider Perspectives on the Delivery of VET in ACE

This questionnaire is for Managers/Co-ordinators or Program Managers

1. Program profile for your provider

Program type	Tick if offered in your setting
ALBE (Adult Literacy and Basic Education)	
ESL (English as a Second Language)	
Adult Yr 12 qualification	
Preparatory (eg return to work/study)	
Vocational Education (non-accredited)	
Vocational Education (accredited)	
General Adult Ed. (hobby, recreational)	

2. Please circle the program type which is your major focus.

3. Please add any comments which explain the program balance in your provider

....

....

....

....

4. For how many years has your organisation delivered adult education programs? *Circle one*

Less than one year One to 5 years 5 to 10 years More than 10 years

5. For how many years has your organisation delivered accredited vocational education programs? *Circle one*

Less than one year One to 5 years 5 to 10 years More than 10 years

6. For how many years has your organisation delivered accredited further education programs? *Circle one*

Less than one year One to 5 years 5 to 10 years More than 10 years

7. When offering accredited programs in either further or vocational education, we offer

Accredited program with:	***Yes or no***	**Comments**
Specific modules		
Whole courses in one year		
Whole courses: one year +		

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8. Some characteristics of your provider

THIS PROVIDER ...	*Yes, No or Don't know*
... receives government funding for specific vocational programs	
... conducts courses for other agencies	
... is operated by a charitable organisation	
... receives funding for labour market programs	
... is community owned and managed	
... receives non-government funding for aspects of its adult education provision	
... provides commercial, fee for service training	
... conducts programs by distance or on-line mode	
... offers adult education programs as a minor part of its role	
... has little relation to most of the questions in this survey	

Size of provider:

This provider is (circle one)

small	0 - 10000 student contact hours
medium	10001 - 30000 student contact hours
large	more than 30000 student contact hours

9. Provider Planning

Do these factors influence your programming decisions?	*Yes, No or Don't know*
... demand from our current students	
... demand from the broader community	
... funding body policies	
... competition from local adult education providers	
... tutor expertise and interest	
... the need to capture new markets	
... identification of under-representation of particular groups	
... management committee policies and interests	
... a need/desire for income generation	
... identified industry priorities and gaps	
... development of educational pathways for learners	

Go back and circle the factor which is most important in influencing your programming

Please feel free to add any comments which relate to question 9

10. Programs offered in this organisation aim to:

	High Priority	***Medium Priority***	***Low Priority***
meet the identified vocational needs of students			
have a primarily vocational focus			
correspond with national vocational education and training policy			
correspond with the State education and training policy			
provide participants with a sense of optimism			
mainly address the learning needs of women			
meet the requirements of an external agency			
be affordable			
help give local people something to do			
address the learning needs of particular disadvantaged groups			
build on previous post-secondary study			
have a local community focus			
complement delivery by other providers in this area			
maximise profit for the provider			
provide opportunities for lifelong learning			
help people to return to study			
facilitate essential social contact			
provide the wide range of programs required			
compensate for negative experiences at school			
offer study modes not otherwise available in this area			
suit the interests of people who live nearby			
other (Please Specify)			

Please feel free to add any comments which relate to question 10

....

....

If you offer ***accredited*** *adult education courses, please answer* ***Question 11***
If you do ***not*** *offer accredited adult education please answer* ***Question 12 and 13***

11.

Our decision to offer **accredited** adult education courses to adult learners in our communities was based on:	*Yes, No or Don't know*
Organisational priorities and mission	
Funding body policies	
Demand from existing participants	
Demand from industry/local enterprises	
Demand from the broader community	
A desire to broaden our range of provision	
Stated or perceived needs of specific groups of learners	
Tutor recommendations	
Availability of new curriculum or delivery opportunities	
Our capacity to offer high quality, formalised adult education	

Please feel free to add any comments which relate to question 11

....

....

....

....

12.

This organisation **does not offer accredited further education** programs because:	*Yes, No or Don't know*
They are not relevant to the needs of our learners *(Please add an explanatory note below)*	
Such provision is not consistent with our organisational goals and philosophies	
These programs are a lower priority for our organisation	
There is insufficient program funding to support this provision	
The administrative requirements are beyond our resourcing capacity	
We do not have staff with the necessary or relevant expertise	

Please feel free to add any comments which relate to question 12

....

....

13.

This organisation **does not offer accredited vocational education** programs because:	*Yes, No or Don't know*
They are not relevant to the needs of our learners *(Please add an explanatory note below)*	
Such provision is not consistent with our organisational goals and philosophies	
These programs are a lower priority for our organisation	
There is insufficient program funding to support this provision	
The administrative requirements are beyond our resourcing capacity	
We do not have staff with the necessary or relevant expertise	

Please feel free to add any comments which relate to question 13

………………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………………………………

Person filling out this questionnaire ...

Tick one which most applies to you

☐ Provider Manager
☐ Provider Committee or Board Member
☐ Program Coordinator or Administrator

This provider is (tick one)

☐ Community Owned and Managed
☐ TAFE

This provider is located in (tick one)

☐ Capital City
☐ Other
☐ Western Australia
☐ Queensland
☐ Victoria

Thank you for your time and energy in addressing this questionnaire.

This questionnaire is for Teachers and Tutors

1. Program profile

Program type	**Tick program area/s in which you teach**
ALBE (Adult Literacy and Basic Education)	
ESL (English as a Second Language)	
Adult Yr 12 qualification	
Preparatory (eg return to work/study)	
Vocational Education (non-accredited)	
Vocational Education (accredited)	
General Adult Ed. (hobby, recreational)	

2. Please circle the program type which is your major focus.

3. Please add any comments about your role in the organisation

…………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………………
…………………………………………………………………………………………………

4. For how many years have you delivered adult education programs?

Circle one

Less than one year   One to 5 years   5 to 10 years   More than 10 years

5.

Students who attend my courses:	**Usually**	**Sometimes**	**Never**	**Don't know**
achieve outcomes which are directly vocational				
are motivated by the prospect of a job afterwards				
complete the course purely out of interest				
achieve personal outcomes which have vocational benefits				
acquire skills which unintentionally translate into vocational opportunities *(please outline below)*				
move into voluntary work afterwards				
are already in paid work				
move into paid work afterwards				
often change goals during the course				

Please feel free to add any comment which relate to any of the above

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6.

Students from this course	**Usually**	**Sometimes**	**Never**	**Don't Know**
go on and do other programs here				
repeat very similar programs here				
go on to programs at different providers				
go into higher level programs				
don't do any other study				
go on and do similar programs at similar providers				
go on and do different programs				
move to full time study in a related field or complete the qualification in another setting				
seek recognition of prior learning for skills acquired in this course				
become active in the running of the provider				

Please feel free to add any comment which relate to any of the above

....
....
....
....

Person filling out this questionnaire ...

Tick one which most applies to you

☐ Sessional tutor
☐ Contract tutor

This provider is (tick one)

☐ Community Owned and Managed
☐ TAFE

This provider is located in (tick one)

☐ Capital City
☐ Other
☐ Western Australia

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☐ Queensland
☐ Victoria

Thank you for your time and energy in addressing this questionnaire

Person filling out this questionnaire ...
Tick one which most applies to you
Provider Manager
Provider Committee or Board Member
Program Coordinator or Administrator
Program Teacher

The National Centre for Vocational Education Research is Australia's primary research and development organisation in the field of vocational education and training.

NCVER undertakes and manages research programs and monitors the performance of Australia's training system.

NCVER provides a range of information aimed at improving the quality of training at all levels.

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